

How to Help Your Loved One Communicate After a Stroke

When adults experience a stroke, they often are left with a condition called aphasia, which means the person has trouble speaking or understanding what people are saying. They may also have a condition called apraxia of speech, which is difficulty moving the muscles that allow for clear speech. This can be frustrating for both the client and the client's friends and family. It can even be dangerous for the client if he or she is unable to say when he or she is in pain or needs help. Learning to use additional methods to communicate can help the client and his or her friends and family start to recover and adjust to their new normal.

- **What options are available?** There are a variety of ways to communicate besides speaking. Drawing, writing, gesturing -- we all communicate without speaking every day! Those of us who find speech difficult or impossible must learn to maximize use of these alternate forms. For some people, low-tech modes such as writing and using aids like pointing to maps or pictures can be very helpful. Some individuals may also choose to use voice output on a computer to help them communicate. A variety of these "speech generating devices" are on the market. Your family member's speech-language pathologist (SLP) can assist with deciding what methods are best in his or her unique situation.



- **What can I do to help?** One of best ways to encourage your family member to communicate using all the tools available to him or her is to have a positive attitude!¹ If family members and friends are supportive, alternative communication methods are more effective and easier on the client. Your loved one's SLP may ask you to assist with deciding what type of alternative communication would be most helpful. He or she may also interview you with respect to what types of vocabulary to meet your loved one's communication needs. The SLP can show you the best ways to help your loved one in his or her efforts to communicate.
- **What happens now?** If you and your family member, in conjunction with the SLP or other clinician, decide that alternative modes of communication are necessary, an assessment will be conducted.² This will generally be a meeting between an SLP who specializes in alternate communication, your loved one and you. An occupational or physical therapist may also be involved if the client has physical disabilities as well. At this meeting, the client's current communication abilities will be assessed and decisions will be made regarding how to proceed. Once the best alternative methods of communication are selected, future therapy sessions will focus on both regaining speech and learning how to communicate effectively without speaking.

¹ Beukelman, D., Fager S., Ball, L., Dietz, A. AAC for Adults with Acquired Neurological Conditions: A Review. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, September 2007 VOL. 23 (3), pp. 230 – 242.

² Binger, C. & Kent-Walsh, J. *What Every Speech-Language Pathologist Should Know About Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, Pearson Education Inc. 2010.