

Communicating after an Acquired Brain Injury (an ABI)

Communication means the passing of information between people. When we communicate, we both give and receive information. We do this, both by speaking and also in non-verbal ways, through our facial expressions, and hand and body movements.

Common things that people have difficulties with

After a brain injury, many people have difficulties with speaking, listening or being aware of other people's non-verbal communication. These difficulties can include problems with talking and writing; or with understanding what they are reading, or what someone is saying. Some people also find it difficult to have a conversation in a group and may get restless, or not realise that they are interrupting other people. Of course, this can lead to problems and means that their family, work colleagues, and friends will need to show them patience and understanding.

People with a brain injury, may have some of the following difficulties:

- Difficulty taking in what someone is saying if there are distractions like the TV on, or more than one person talking at a time.
- Needing things to be repeated several times.
- Having difficulty when someone speaks quickly or tells them a lot of information in one go.
- Not paying attention in conversations.
- Not understanding fully what someone is saying.
- Not being able to follow detailed instructions.
- Misunderstanding jokes, sarcasm, or taking what someone says literally.

Some people may also have difficulties in expressing themselves, such as:

- Trouble "finding" the word they want to say, or using the wrong word altogether.
- Talking a lot more than they used to.

- Getting the order of the words in a sentence mixed up.
- Repeating the same thing over and over (this is known as "perseveration").
- Answering only "yes" or "no" when someone asks them a question.
- Poor spelling and difficulty in learning new words.
- Trouble with writing full sentences.

A Speech and Language Therapist may be able to assist by helping to strengthen muscles, to increase movement of the mouth and tongue, with breathing exercises, and by slowing down speech. Some people find that equipment, such as a voice synthesizer, may be a way for them to communicate when they are not able to use their own voice. **See overleaf for more.**

Some tips if you have a brain injury

- Don't rush - it is ok to speak a bit slower if that suits you better.
- Try to stay calm.
- Tell your family and friends what you have difficulty with so that they can be more aware of it.
- If you can't find the word you want to use, try to use another one that is nearly the same, or explain what the word means.
- If you are going to a meeting, for example, try to plan what you are going to say before you get there.
- Use gestures, photographs, or pointing to show what you want to communicate.

Remember - getting the message across is what's important, not having the words exactly right. So do try to relax.

Top Tip - turn off distractions like the TV or radio to make it easier to talk and concentrate.

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Tips if you don't understand what someone has said:

- Ask the person to talk more slowly.
- Repeat what the person has said to check that you have understood them correctly.
- You could ask them to explain what they have said using different words.
- You could ask them to repeat what they have said if it wasn't clear.

For Carers or Partners

- Give the person time to finish what they are saying (try not to finish their sentences for them).
- Also, try not to speak on their behalf.
- Always try to establish eye contact with them.
- Watch their lips carefully as it can help you to understand what they are saying.
- Don't be afraid to say if you haven't understood.
- If you understand part of what the person said, repeat that bit so he or she doesn't have to repeat it.
- Remember to check that the other person has understood you.
- Include the person in the conversation as much as you can.
- Avoid speaking loudly.
- Remember that, just because someone has a difficulty talking, it doesn't mean that he, or she, can't understand you.
- Use hand gestures to help show the person what you mean.
- Try to be as encouraging as possible with anyone who has a difficulty communicating.
- Don't force the person to speak.
- Agree to turn off the sound of the TV or radio.
- If you have something important to talk about, try to pick a time when the person with the brain injury is relaxed and not tired.

Here are some Terms that you may Hear

Dysarthria describes the condition where someone slurs their words when they speak. After a brain injury, this can happen due to a weakness of the muscles of the face, tongue, voice box (larynx) and the muscles used for breathing. The person's speech may be quick, slow or quiet, as well as slurred.

Aphasia is any impairment of speech, and can be divided into **Receptive Aphasia** and **Expressive Aphasia**:

- When someone has difficulty understanding written words and what people are saying, this is known as **Receptive Aphasia**.
- When they have difficulty talking and expressing ideas this is called **Expressive Aphasia**. They may also find writing difficult or not possible.

Global Aphasia – this when someone has both **Receptive** and **Expressive Aphasia**.

Dyspraxia of Speech – this is when someone isn't able to link together sounds and syllables correctly in some words.

Dysnomia is when a person's speech flows normally but they sometimes cannot find the right word that they want to say.

A **Speech and Language Therapist** may be able to assist anyone who has these communication difficulties.

Talk to your **Public Health Nurse** in your local Health Centre to see what services are available. Call the **HSE** on **1850 24 1850** to find your local Health Centre.

If you want to contact a qualified **Private Speech and Language Therapist**, you can call the *Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Private Practice* on 01 878 7959 for names or advice, or visit their website: www.iasltpp.com.

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