

Helping someone with
communication problems

Stroke
association

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Together we can conquer stroke

After a stroke, many people have problems with communication. This guide will help you support someone with communication problems.

In this guide we explain how a stroke can affect someone's communication and what you can do to help them.

It's aimed at the friends and family members of someone who has had a stroke, but it may also be useful for stroke survivors too.

We have information on all aspects of stroke.

If you have a question that is not answered in this guide, visit **stroke.org.uk** or call our Stroke Helpline on **0303 3033 100**.



If you want more information on this topic, take a look at our *Complete guide to communication problems after stroke*. Go to **stroke.org.uk/publications** to find it.

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Why can't my friend or family member communicate properly?



Problems with communication happen because a stroke damages your brain.

When we communicate, our brain has to complete a series of tasks. So when someone asks you a question, your brain has to understand what you are being asked, decide on your answer and put the words together, before you can give them a reply.

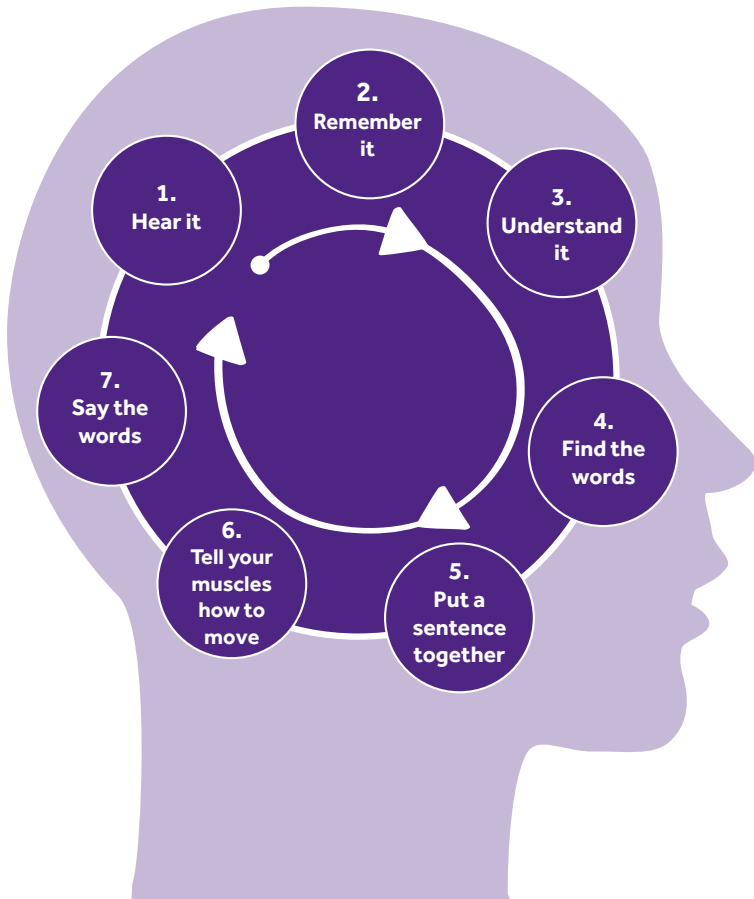
Different parts of our brain are responsible for each of these tasks. If one of these parts is damaged by a stroke, it can cause problems with speaking or understanding what someone has said to you.

Communication isn't just about speaking, however. A stroke can also cause problems with reading and writing.



Communication problems do not affect your intelligence.

What happens when we're asked a question



Will it get better?



Most communication problems do improve. However, it's very difficult to predict how much they'll improve or how long it will take, as it's different for everyone.

Problems tend to improve quite quickly within the first three to six months, but people continue to recover for months and even years after this.

While some improvement will happen naturally, people are likely to make a much better recovery if they have speech and language therapy and practise communicating as much as they can.

For most people, getting better is about returning to the way they were before they had a stroke. Unfortunately, this isn't always possible. But even if someone doesn't recover their speech completely, there are many ways to communicate that don't rely on speaking.



How can I help?

It can be hard to know how to help someone when they're finding speaking or understanding difficult. So here are some tips to help you.

1

Get involved

If your friend or family member is learning new ways to communicate, help them practise as much as you can by including them in conversations and supporting them.

Go along to their speech and language therapy sessions, if you're able to, or ask their speech and language therapist to send you information if you can't. You can ask the therapist what you can do to help.

The more your friend or family member practises their communication, the more progress they'll make.

Our **guide to good conversations** over the next few pages will help you.

A guide to good conversations



When you're talking to someone, it's up to both of you to make sure the conversation is a good one.

This doesn't change if the person you're talking to has communication problems. It may make your conversation a bit more difficult, but it can still be enjoyable and successful. Here are our tips to help you.

Before you start

- Remove distractions and cut out any background noise as much as possible.
- Make sure you've got enough time and are not in a hurry.
- Be ready to make mistakes – conversations are about sharing and understanding each other, so it doesn't matter how you do it or how long it takes. You just have to keep trying.
- Focus on what you're doing. Look as if you're ready to talk, sit close to or opposite each other and make eye contact.

Do

- ✓ **Keep it simple** – use short sentences and ask one question at a time.
- ✓ **Say when you don't understand** – it can be helpful to share with them the part of the message you have understood.
- ✓ **Stick to one topic at a time** and make sure you both know when you've moved on to another.
- ✓ **Use whatever you can** – you can both point to things, make gestures, write or draw.
- ✓ **Talk naturally** about things that you're both interested in.
- ✓ **Listen** – good communication is as much about listening as it is talking.

To be a good listener you need to:

- give time and attention
- try not to interrupt
- allow silences
- ask questions and give them time to reply.

Don't

- ✘ **Rush** – give each other time to understand and respond.

- ✘ **Finish sentences or guess** what the other person is trying to say – it's extremely frustrating. Just give them the time they need to get there themselves.

- ✘ **Ask questions you already know the answers to** – it's a conversation, not a test

- ✘ **Pretend to understand** what they've told you or assume that you have – always check.

- ✘ **Forget you're talking to an adult** who has problems with their communication, not their intelligence.

Five rules for good conversations:

1. show respect
2. give each other time
3. listen
4. be positive
5. never assume.

Some other things to think about

- **Check yes/no responses.** Sometimes people with communication problems say yes or no when it's not what they mean. So check with a simple thumbs up or down, or draw a tick and a cross on a piece of paper and ask them to point.
- **Write down key words.** Even if they can't read very well, many people can still recognise single words. So writing down key words as you go along can help you if you get stuck.
- If they are struggling to think of a word, then **ask them to spell it**, write it down, or point to the letter it begins with on an alphabet chart.
- **Think about other things that could help your conversation.** Do you have pictures from the holiday you're talking about, which you could look at while you chat? Or why not sit down with a photo album or a newspaper, or perhaps a book on a topic that interests one of you, and talk about that together?

More tips for family and friends

2

Be patient

It can be distressing when someone you love can't understand what you tell them or if you can't understand them. All relationships rely on communication so it can be very hard when it suddenly becomes difficult.

But you need to remember that things will get better with time. Even if your friend or family member never completely recovers their ability to speak, you'll find other ways to get across what you want to say to each other and it won't have to stop them from doing what they want to do.

It will take time and it won't always be easy, so make sure you both get the support you need.

“Physically and mentally and verbally, you need to just practise and practise and practise.”

John

3

Include them

Many people with communication problems say they feel invisible. So make sure your friend or family member is still included in conversations – whether it’s an argument, an important decision or simply a chat about the weather.

You may avoid talking to your friend or family member because you think it will make them tired or embarrassed or frustrated. But equally they might think it’s because you’re not interested in knowing what they have to say. Plus the more they practise the more they’ll improve. So keep talking.

4

Encourage them

Your friend or family member is probably going to be more reliant on you than before. But it won’t help if you do everything for them. So as their communication begins to improve, encourage them to do things on their own. You may have to ‘bite your tongue’ to stop yourself from speaking for them, or give them a gentle push to try something for the first time. But remind them that you’re there to help if they run into trouble.

5

Make time

People can start to feel very lonely when they're not able to talk or go out in the same way they used to. So simply spending some time with your friend or family member can really help. Make an effort to talk to them about how they are coping. Although it may be difficult, you'll find a way to do it.

It can also help to spend time not talking, to give them a break. Find something you can do together that doesn't require much talking, like cooking a meal, going for a walk or playing a game.

"My husband's biggest problem after his stroke was lack of confidence. He still prefers me to answer the phone. But if I take the calls I'm doing him no favours."

Marie

Where to get help and information



Talk to us

Our Stroke Helpline is for anyone affected by a stroke, including family, friends and carers. The Helpline can give you information and support on any aspect of stroke. Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100** or email **info@stroke.org.uk**.



My Stroke Guide

My Stroke Guide is the stroke support tool and online community from the Stroke Association. Log on at **mystrokeguide.com**. Our Enquiry Line can support you with using My Stroke Guide: call **0300 222 5707** or email **mystrokeguide@stroke.org.uk**.



Talk to others affected by stroke

There may be a stroke group in your local area where you can meet other stroke survivors. You can meet people on our My Stroke Guide online chat forum at **mystrokeguide.com**, and our Facebook page **Facebook.com/TheStrokeAssociation**.

Call our Helpline or visit **stroke.org.uk/support** for more information on stroke groups and other face-to-face support.

Other sources of help and information

The following organisations can provide information, advice and support. If you'd like to know about others in your area, contact our Stroke Helpline.

Aphasia Alliance

Website: www.aphasiaalliance.org

Tel: 01525 290 002

Lists organisations that people with aphasia and their carers might find useful.

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland

Website: www.chss.org.uk

Advice Line: 0808 801 0899

Email: adviceline@chss.org.uk

Offer communication support to people in Scotland, including groups and one-to-one support.

Communication Matters

Website: www.communicationmatters.org.uk

Tel: 0845 456 8211

Email: admin@communicationmatters.org.uk

Has information about methods of communication you can use instead of writing or speaking.

Some terms you may have heard



Here's a guide to some of the technical words you may hear people use.

Aphasia is when you have problems with speaking and understanding what other people say. Around a third of stroke survivors have it. It's sometimes called dysphasia. People with aphasia can also have trouble with reading and writing.

Apraxia of speech happens when you can't move the muscles in your face, mouth and throat in the right order when you're speaking. This can make it difficult for other people to understand what you're saying. This is sometimes called dyspraxia.

Dysarthria happens when you can't control the muscles in your face, mouth and throat in the way you need to when you're speaking. This can mean that the way you speak isn't very clear and your speech may seem slurred or slow.

SLT or SALT is short for speech and language therapist. This is someone who works with people to improve their ability to communicate. They also work with people who have swallowing problems.

About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.



How did we do?

To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk.



Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.



Always get individual advice

Please be aware that this information is not intended as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. We strive to ensure that the content we provide is accurate and up-to-date, but information can change over time. So far as is permitted by law, the Stroke Association does not accept any liability in relation to the use of the information in this publication, or any third-party information or websites included or referred to.

Contact us

We're here for you. Contact us for expert information and support by phone, email and online.

Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100

From a textphone: 18001 0303 3033 100

Email: info@stroke.org.uk

Website: stroke.org.uk

We are the Stroke Association

We believe in life after stroke. That's why we support stroke survivors to make the best recovery they can. It's why we campaign for better stroke care. And it's why we fund research to develop new treatments and ways of preventing stroke.

We rely on your support to fund life-saving research and vital services for people affected by stroke. Join the fight against stroke now at stroke.org.uk/fundraising. Together we can conquer stroke.

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