

Life after stroke

# Helping someone with communication problems

Together we can conquer stroke

# Around one third of people who have a stroke have problems with speaking and understanding what other people say.

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In this booklet 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 booklet, 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?

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Problems with communication happen because a **stroke damages your brain.**

When we communicate our brain has to complete a series of tasks. When someone asks you a question, for example, 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.

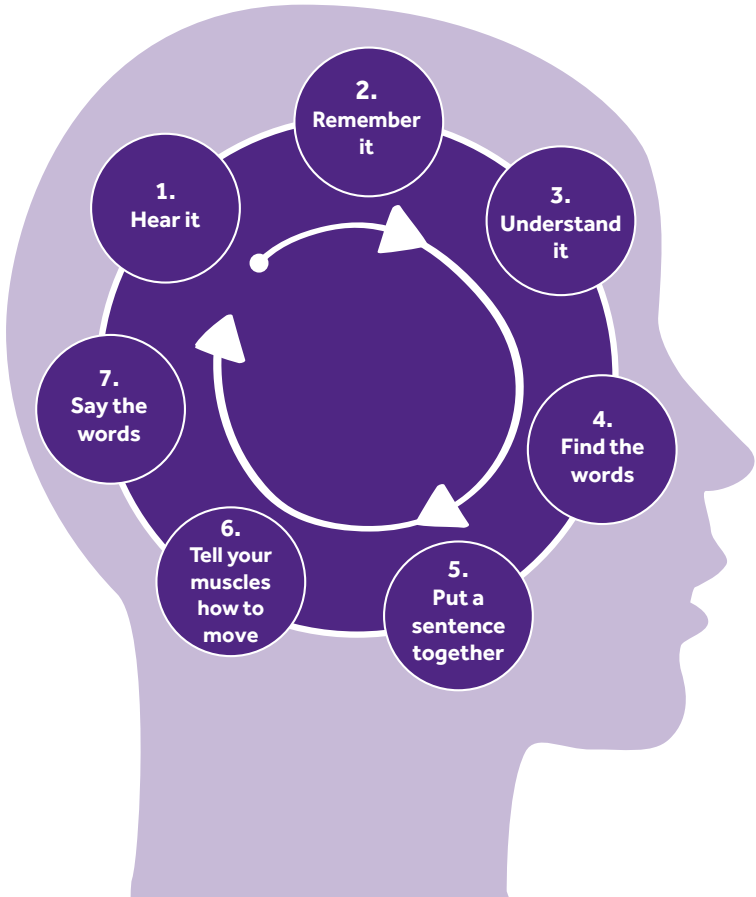
Communication isn't just about speaking. A stroke can also cause problems with reading and writing.



Communication problems do not affect your intelligence.

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## What happens when we're asked a question



## Will it get better?

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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?

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



### **Practise, practise, practise**

If your friend or family member is learning new ways to communicate, then you need to as well. So practise with them as much as you can.

**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.

The more your friend or family member practises their communication, the more progress they'll make. There will always be exercises from their therapy sessions to do at home, so do them together and **take every opportunity you can to practise** having conversations.

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



# A guide to good conversations

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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 just as good. Here are our tips to help you.

## Before you start

- **Make time**  
Remove distractions and make sure you're not under any other pressures, so you can give each other your full attention.
- **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.
- **Don't worry**  
Conversations are about sharing and understanding each other, so it doesn't matter how you do it or how long it takes. Be ready to make mistakes – you just have to keep trying.

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## Do

- ✓ **Keep it simple** – use short sentences and ask one question at a time.
- ✓ **Say when you don't understand** – it's not a problem, they may just need to try it again.
- ✓ **Stick to one topic at a time** and make sure you both know when you've moved on to another.
- ✓ **Use whatever you can** – point to things, make gestures, write, draw, hum or sing.
- ✓ **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
- check that you've understood.

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## 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.

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## 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 what 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

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### 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**

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### 3

#### Keep talking

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 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.

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## 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 can I get help and support?

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Your friend or family member's **speech and language therapist** will be able to give you advice about the best way for you to support them.

### How we can help



Our **Stroke Helpline** can give you information and support on any issue you or your family may be facing after stroke. Whatever the problem, we're here to help.



We have **coordinators** in some areas of the UK, who can give you and your family information, practical advice and emotional support. We also run **stroke groups** across the UK. Even if we don't run one in your area, we can tell you about others that do.



We also have **communication support coordinators** in a lot of areas. They run groups for stroke survivors to practise their communication and can also work with people one-to-one.

To find out how we can help, just get in touch:

- call our Stroke Helpline on **0303 3033 100**
- email **info@stroke.org.uk**
- visit **stroke.org.uk**



## Other organisations that can help

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

**Connect** is a charity for people who have problems with speaking and understanding what people say. This is known as aphasia.

**Website:** [www.ukconnect.org](http://www.ukconnect.org)

**Tel:** 020 7367 0840

**Email:** [info@ukconnect.org](mailto:info@ukconnect.org)

**Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland** offer communication support to people in Scotland, including groups and one-to-one support.

**Website:** [www.chss.org.uk](http://www.chss.org.uk)

**Advice Line:** 0808 801 0899

**Email:** [advice@chss.org.uk](mailto:advice@chss.org.uk)

**Communication Matters** has information about methods of communication you can use instead of writing or speaking.

**Website:** [www.communicationmatters.org.uk](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk)

**Tel:** 0845 456 8211

**Email:** [admin@communicationmatters.org.uk](mailto:admin@communicationmatters.org.uk)

## Some terms you may have heard

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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. Most people who have aphasia also have problems 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.

**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

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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](mailto:feedback@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're here for you. If you'd like to know more please get in touch.**

**Stroke Helpline:** 0303 3033 100

**Website:** [stroke.org.uk](http://stroke.org.uk)

**Email:** [info@stroke.org.uk](mailto:info@stroke.org.uk)

**From a textphone:** 18001 0303 3033 100

Text **STROKE 5** to **70300** to donate **£5**. It only takes a couple of seconds to make a BIG difference.

For more information visit [stroke.org.uk/savelives](http://stroke.org.uk/savelives)

Texts cost your donation amount plus one message at your standard network charity rate. The Stroke Association will receive 100% of your gift. Always ask the bill payer's permission. For questions about donating by text call 0330 6600 425.

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