

COMMUNICATION AFTER ACQUIRED BRAIN INJURY

AND HOW TO HELP

INTRODUCTION

Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) is the term to describe an injury to the brain that you were not born with. ABI and recovery are experienced differently by everyone. The team at P.A.U.L For Brain Recovery want to support you during this difficult time and help you understand how an ABI may affect your life and how to manage the changes that occur. This booklet will specifically focus on changes to a person's communication skills.

After reading this booklet, we hope to give you a better understanding of changes to communication that may occur after sustaining an ABI, and how these can be managed with the support of health professionals, P.A.U.L For Brain Recovery and the wider community. The booklet provides guidance for those experiencing communication difficulties, but can also be used to inform friends or family members of those affected by ABI.

Due to the nature of communication difficulties, you may find that it is difficult to understand much of the written information included in this booklet, so it may be helpful to have a friend or family member read it with you.



The Impact of Acquired Brain Injury on Communication

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What is meant by 'communication difficulties'?

By 'communication' we mean the set of skills that we have learnt in life to understand people around us, and to help ourselves be understood; for humans it commonly involves processes such as talking, writing and using body language and gestures. Communication is a natural process for humans, and we are often unaware of the level of complexity involved when we speak, listen and understand each other. You may find that communication difficulties have a big impact on your life.



There are two main ways that we communicate with each other - verbally and non-verbally - and both can be impacted after a brain injury.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION refers to spoken and written language; it is our ability to form sentences and understand the meaning of words. You may notice struggling to structure a sentence correctly, difficulty finding the correct word to use, and being unable to understand what someone else is saying or what their words mean.

What is meant by 'communication difficulties'?

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION refers to the tone of voice, movement of the body, and facial expressions in order to convey information without the use of words. You might notice that you find it more difficult to identify facial expressions than before, and so may misinterpret what people are trying to say. For example, when someone says something sarcastically, you may struggle to pick up on the non-verbal clues that help you recognise this is not meant seriously. It may also affect your own ability to express your non-verbal cues.



Why and how can brain injury change my communication abilities?

It can be common to experience changes in your speech, language and communication after a brain injury, especially when injury has occurred to the left side (left hemisphere) of your brain. You may experience different communication difficulties depending on the location and severity of your brain injury, and how you experience these difficulties will be unique to you. This can be a really scary time for some, but understanding your difficulties and learning strategies to help you manage them can be helpful.

There are a number of ways a person's communication abilities may be impacted after brain injury. The following are details about some specific changes you may notice:

DIFFICULTIES WITH UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

This may also be referred to as 'Receptive Aphasia' as people struggle to understand the communication they are receiving. It can be difficult to understand what people are saying, with previously familiar words losing meaning, or conversations being difficult to follow. It is often associated with injury to an area of the brain called 'Wernicke's Area'. It can also be more difficult to follow a piece of written information; you may find you need to re-read information or have pictures to help give meaning to words.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Communication as a whole has lots of processes involved, including a person's tone of voice, their body movements, and facial expression, that makes up the non-verbal side of the communication. Sometimes after brain injury, you may find it more difficult to recognise and interpret these subtler elements of communication.

Why and how can brain injury change my communication abilities?

DIFFICULTIES WITH OTHERS UNDERSTANDING YOU

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

This may also be referred to as 'Expressive Aphasia' as other people struggle to understand the communication that you are expressing, and you may appear to say words that make no sense. It is often associated with injury to an area of the brain called 'Broca's Area'. Somebody with this sort of brain injury may be able to speak fluently, but there is little/no meaning to the words and the speech lacks context. This means you are able to understand other people's talking or written words, but struggle to speak yourself, so sentences may be short, simple or disrupted.

Acquired Brain Injury may also cause specific speech difficulties, such as **dysarthria** and **dyspraxia**, which affect your physical ability to speak. This is caused by damage to parts of the nervous system involved in speech, meaning it is harder to use the muscles and senses we usually rely on to talk. You may experience a change or reduction of movement of the lips and tongue, difficulties controlling the flow of air from the lungs when speaking, a slurring or change in your tone and volume of speech. You may also have difficulty saying what you intended to say and have to consciously think about it.

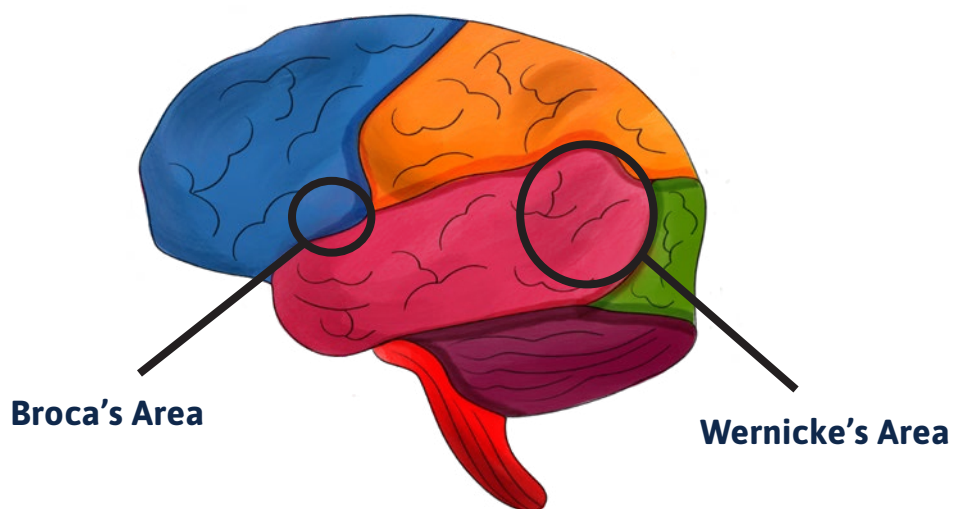
You may find that you speak **slower**, or say wrong words with a similar meaning (**semantic errors**) or a word that rhymes or sounds similar (**phonetic errors**). Some people often report the '**tip-of-the-tongue**' phenomenon after brain injury, where you feel you know the right word but can't seem to say it. Many of these difficulties can be supported with strategies suggested later in this booklet.



Why and how can brain injury change my communication abilities?

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Your body language could be difficult to interpret by another person if you have experienced changes to your physical mobility or are in an altered state of consciousness from the Acquired Brain Injury. You could find yourself making involuntary movements in response to communication from someone else or, alternatively, be unresponsive when you would normally make eye contact or use gestures such as nodding or hand movements to support a conversation/interaction. It can be difficult to understand how you may be reacting to communication due to these difficulties, but it may be that you are able to respond in your own adapted way. Speech and Language Therapists can help to measure what stimulates your responses and how these specifically can be used for you to communicate.



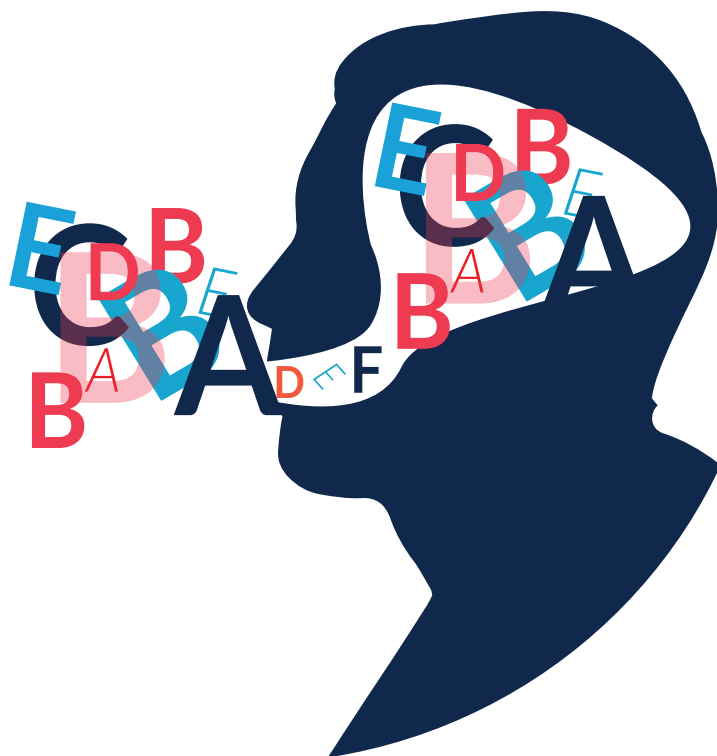
OTHER THINGS THAT CAN AFFECT COMMUNICATION

As mentioned earlier, communication is a very complicated process and can involve many other cognitive processes that could in turn affect your communication abilities. For example, having changes in your: attention and concentration; memory; reasoning; fatigue; social skills; speed of information processing; and ability to multi-task or divide your attention. P.A.U.L For Brain Recovery have further literature to help you better understand these other cognitive changes.

Why and how can brain injury change my communication abilities?

OTHER AREAS YOU MAY NOTICE SOME DIFFICULTIES IN:

- Knowing when or how to start and finish conversations, or when to contribute/offer your points
- Speaking more or less than you used to
- Overlooking your recipient's conversational cues
- Recognising the appropriate manner or style of interaction for the conversation



Impact of communication difficulties

Experiencing a change in your ability to understand others or be understood can be very distressing and disruptive to your daily life. Some people with communication difficulties find it can:

- Reduce their social contact, leaving them feeling more isolated
- Make it more challenging to live independently, or
- Prevent them carrying out activities they used to do (such as work)

Recognising these difficulties early is helpful because then you can identify which areas you may need the most support in.



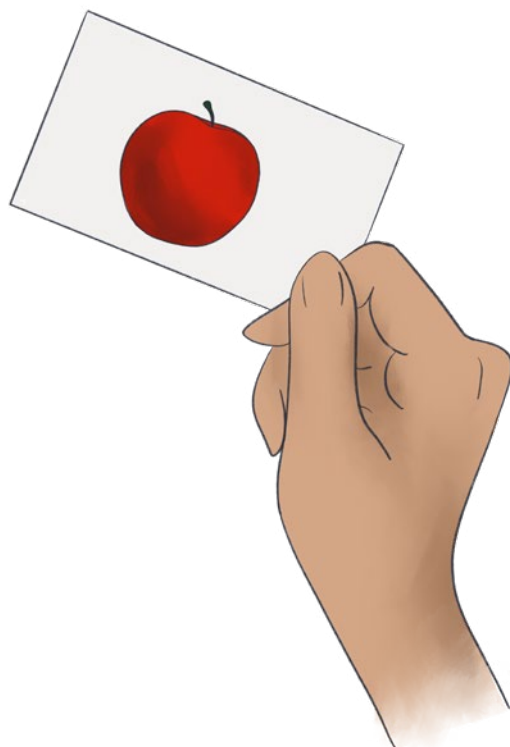
Ways to help you manage your own communication difficulties

There are a number of things that you can do for yourself to make it easier when you are struggling with communication difficulties from acquired brain injury. Remember, everyone experiences brain injury differently, so some of these strategies may not apply to you, and others may take more practice to be helpful. You may also find it helpful to ask a friend, family member, or healthcare worker to assist you with some activities. Here are some examples to support easier communication after brain injury:

EXPLORE OTHER METHODS OF COMMUNICATION like using picture cards. Developing alternative ways to talk and make your thoughts understood could include pairing words with gestures, writing, or drawing.

COGNITIVE STIMULATION ACTIVITIES: designed to stimulate thinking skills, for instance object naming and word repetitions. These are often game-based and can show improvement in language-related memory.

USING A MIRROR TO PERFORM MOVEMENTS with mouth, lips and tongue in response to specific words, such as practising facial expressions, moving your tongue in different directions, licking lips, etc.



Ways to help you manage your own communication difficulties

IF YOU FIND YOU ARE STRUGGLING to 'find' the right word, try **self-cueing** by saying out loud the sound the word starts with, or if you don't know, running through the alphabet. Or, in cases of that tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon, you can self-cue by describing the word.

IF YOU FIND YOU KEEP SAYING THE WRONG WORD (making naming errors), practicing words you regularly get stuck on, **building associations and links** with them. For example, if forgetting the word "chair": picture a person you know called Charlotte, in the chair, brushing their hair = Chair.

YOU MAY FIND IT HELPFUL TO TALK ABOUT SHORT TOPICS in conversations and **speak slowly**, making sure you have plenty of time to communicate, or perhaps write down the **key points** you want to make ahead of a conversation.

MANAGE THE LEVEL OF COMPLEXITY IN THE COMMUNICATION avoid speaking to too many people at one time to make it easier to follow the conversation and get your points across.

DON'T PRETEND TO UNDERSTAND IF YOU DON'T; be honest and help people to better understand how to help you.

Support with your language abilities may also be supported by a Speech and Language Therapist; talk to your GP or Consultant about a referral if you think this may be helpful.

Some people may not understand what you are going through because they cannot 'see' a damaged brain. This is why talking to family, friends and the P.A.U.L For Brain Recovery team is important. Accessing ABI education sessions may help you and your loved ones understand the impact of ABI and offer you reassurance and encouragement as you recover. Share your feelings with others. You can find support and reassurance from people who understand your problems, such as at P.A.U.L For Brain Recovery.

How friends and family can help

As well as the strategies that you can do to help yourself, there are also many things that those close to you can do to help and support you if you are experiencing communication difficulties. Here are some suggestions:

USE GESTURES AND PICTURES to help give meaning to a conversation

TRY TO AVOID OVERLOADING YOUR LOVED ONE with too much information or unfamiliar words; keep points brief and simple.

BE PATIENT, PAUSE OFTEN and give them time to process the conversation and respond.

BE AWARE of your own verbal and non-verbal communication. Use kind words and have a gentle tone with your loved one. You may need to simplify the language you use, or exaggerate facial expressions or gestures to make it easier to understand, but do your best to not 'talk down' to the person.

BREAK UP A CONVERSATION by asking every so often if they understand what you are saying, to give them the chance to ask questions or say if they need something repeating.



How friends and family can help

YOU MAY BE PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE for initiating and guiding the conversation, or piecing together smaller chunks of communication, but that doesn't mean your loved one values the conversation any less. Try to remember the person you are talking to, not the brain injury; having 'normal' conversations can be really valuable in supporting your loved one's emotional wellbeing as well as their rehabilitation from brain injury.

TRY TO MINIMISE DISTRACTIONS, especially when having an important conversation, as this reduces the amount your loved one's brain needs to process.

ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT the use of strategies identified in the previous section.

With the constant developments of new technology, there are also helpful resources available online, or some pieces of software/hardware you can get to facilitate communication. If you are interested in accessing further resources, you (or someone on your behalf) can talk to your GP about a referral to an Occupational Therapist or Speech and Language Therapist.

Please remember, if you are struggling with communication problems after brain injury, or are frequently interacting with someone who is, then access the support available to you at P.A.U.L For Brain Recovery.

You are not alone - Communication is key

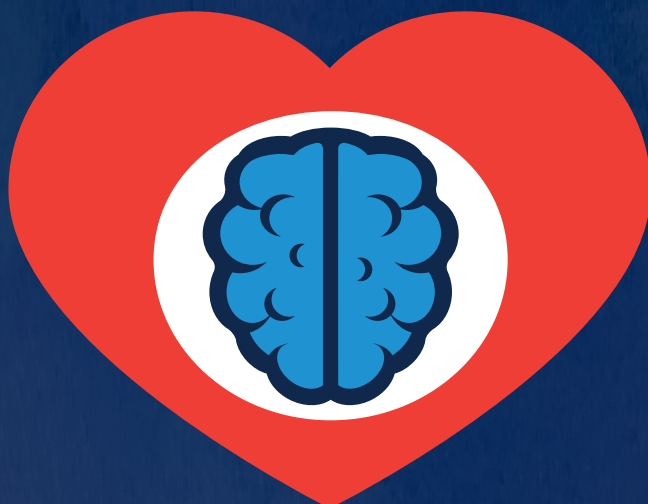
FOCUS ON:
how far you've come

NOT

how far you have to go



Please get in touch if the charity can help you further with your recovery journey



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