

## Maximising your thinking and memory abilities



## About this handout

**This handout is for use by anyone who is experiencing problems with their language, and for their friends and family.**

It describes:

- Tips and suggestions for the management of language difficulties
- Ideas about how friends and family can help
- Ways to avoid frustration and to maintain involvement in social and family activities
- Other sources of information and support.

# Managing language problems

Language is the way in which we stay connected to our world. It puts us in touch with others, and allows us to express ideas and feelings. It also gives us the means to help manage our environment.

Common problems with using language include difficulties in:

- Finding words
- Recalling the meaning of words
- Expressing oneself and making oneself understood
- Understanding others
- Reading and writing.

In some cases speech and language problems can be part of the early stages of a progressive dementia such as Alzheimer's disease, or as part of a rare condition such as progressive aphasia or semantic dementia. Typically, other aspects of thinking and everyday function remain okay in the early stages—sometimes for many years. For instance, it may still be possible to undertake general maintenance or building work, maintain a garden, travel overseas or paint pictures.

## Difficulties finding the word you need

Specific problems with word-finding difficulty can cause:

- Pauses in conversation or use of fillers such as “um, er...”
- Wrong words being said, including words that sound the same (e.g., “track” for “truck”) or words that have a related meaning (e.g., “school” for “work”)
- Non-specific words like “thing” or “what’s-it” being substituted
- The use of new ways to describe things; for example, when asking for help finding a belt while dressing, a person may ask for “the circular cow thing that I used yesterday and before.”

Things that can assist include:

- Trying to help your brain to search for the word:
  - Think of another word with similar meaning
  - Describe the word that is difficult to retrieve (e.g., its use, size, shape and ‘colour’)
  - Picture the object in your mind
  - Draw the word.
- Trying to allow yourself some time to come up with the word on your own. Sometimes letting others help to supply a clue (perhaps the first letter or sound) or the word itself can help to keep the flow of conversation.
- Writing a list of words or names that often cause problems and carrying this list with you. Before engaging in an activity or group meeting, review the list of words/ names.

# Managing language problems

## Difficulties with expression and making yourself understood

Speech may take a lot of effort, with short sentences and incorrect pronunciation or incorrect use of words; or it may remain fluent yet be difficult to understand.

Things that can assist include:

	<i>For the person with language difficulties</i>	<i>For the other person in the conversation</i>
<b>1. ALLOW TIME</b>	Allow yourself plenty of time to get your message across. Think about what you want to say before you speak.	Allow adequate time to respond to questions or requests. Try not to speak or supply words for the person with language difficulties unless it is necessary or requested.
<b>2. PRACTISE</b>	If you get time, practise saying things that are important to you.	
<b>3. USE OTHER MODES OF COMMUNICATION</b>	Where necessary, writing, drawing, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions can be used in addition to speech.	Speak a little louder and exaggerate your mouth movements a little when making speech sounds. It will help you sound clearer and people may be better able to understand your message.
<b>4. USE "THINGS" IN THE ENVIRONMENT</b>	During conversation, we share the same place and time with the other person, and see the same objects, same people that are around. When you can't find a word, simply pointing or gesturing towards the object can help (e.g., "I bought that yesterday").	Avoid asking too many open-ended questions that require detailed explanations. Make statements or ask simple questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" or gestural (pointing) response.
<b>5. RE-PHRASE WHEN THE MESSAGE IS UNCLEAR</b>	Do not hesitate to re-phrase what you wanted to say during conversation. If you end up with difficulty expressing yourself in one way, try another way, even mid-sentence (e.g., "I was waiting for... for... expecting my nephew").	Some responses will be incomplete or may be unrelated or opposite to what the person actually wants to say. For responses such as "pen.....paper," you can complete the utterance by saying, "Do you want a pen and piece of paper?" If a wrong word is produced, it is not necessary to correct the word, but you can repeat what you think the person meant to say, such as when the individual says "spoon," but meant to say "fork," respond to him/her by saying "here's the fork".
<b>6. AVOID FRUSTRATION</b>	If you attempt to convey your message several times and you are still not understood, it is best to try another strategy or try again later, before frustration begins.	Never pretend that you understand when you don't. Summarise what you HAVE understood and see if that helps the conversation partner to convey their message.

## Difficulties understanding others

Difficulties understanding others can include having trouble following conversations, especially in larger groups; asking for information to be repeated and misunderstanding things that are said, even though hearing is normal.

Things that can assist include:

	<i><b>For the person with language difficulties</b></i>	<i><b>For the other person in the conversation</b></i>
<b>1. GAIN ATTENTION AND MINIMISE DISTRACTIONS</b>	<p>Make sure you are alert and paying attention. Try to directly face the person you are talking to, ideally at eye level.</p> <p>Make sure you are wearing your hearing aid and glasses if you need them.</p> <p>Reduce distractions. Make sure you turn the TV and radio off, and speak one-on-one to people; or on the phone. Wherever possible, choose a quieter environment; for example, the quieter restaurant or café.</p>	<p>Make sure you have the person's full attention by saying their name or gently tapping them on the shoulder, before attempting to speak to the person with language difficulties.</p> <p>Avoid environments that are too noisy or with too many distractions.</p>
<b>2. MAKE SPEECH AS CLEAR AS POSSIBLE</b>	<p>Ask the speaker to speak more slowly. Often when speech is difficult to understand, speaking more slowly helps.</p>	<p>Keep your own communication simple, but adult. Use short, concrete statements rather than lengthy, complex questions and directions in daily conversation.</p> <p>Avoid a rapid speech rate.</p> <p>Supplement directions with use of facial expression and/or use of gestures.</p> <p>Speak clearly but don't shout at the person.</p>
<b>3. CLARIFY, REPEAT, RE-PHRASE AND SIMPLIFY</b>	<p>Ask the speaker to repeat, re-phrase and simplify the message. This may be all that is needed to gain understanding. If the message is repeated several times, however, and is still not being understood, it is best to try another strategy, to avoid frustration on your part and that of the listener.</p>	<p>Do not assume that the person has understood what you have said even if he/she looks alert. Sometimes it is important to clarify comprehension.</p> <p>Try to simplify your message. The main goal is to get your message across. It is of little importance if speaker and listener use correct grammar or long involved vocabulary.</p> <p>Speak a little more slowly, emphasise key words and use clues such as pictures or real objects if necessary.</p>
<b>4. TAKE TURNS</b>	<p>Pay attention to 'turn-taking' during conversation. That is, make sure the other person has finished their sentence before you start talking. This way, you allow the other person to express what they wanted to say; and this can improve your understanding.</p>	<p>Never presume that the person with language difficulties does not understand what you are saying. Don't talk about him/her in his/her presence without including them in the conversation.</p>

## How can family and friends help?

- Treat people with language difficulties as adults; allow independence in activities of daily living unless otherwise advised.
- Make sure that key people (family and friends) understand the nature of the language difficulty, and the ways they can help with communication.
- Encourage all attempts to speak. Try to downplay errors and avoid criticisms/corrections. Avoid insisting that each word be produced perfectly.
- Be aware that communication abilities are often inconsistent. Avoid comments such as, "You said it yesterday, so why can't you say it today?"
- Use humour and smile.
- Encourage normal activities (such as dinner with family, company, going out). Remind family or friends to keep including the person with communication problems in social and family activities. Try to involve them in family discussions and decision-making as much as possible.
- Some times of the day may be easier than others for communication. Plan communication demands, such as appointments and so forth, during a time when alertness and communication ability is at a peak.
- Language problems can be very frustrating. Encourage rest times during the day and include activities that require minimal verbal communication such as listening to music or going for a walk.

## Key Point

**A speech therapist may be helpful in assessing and developing an appropriate aid and other communication strategies. Aids can include:**

- Communication Notebooks. These contain words or pictures organised by topics, such as the names of family members and friends, places that you like to go, foods, clothing items and so forth.
- Gestures. Specific gestures can be taught to people with language difficulties.
- Computerised Communication Devices. Instruction may be required.



## Other sources of information and support

### ***Australian Aphasia Association***

Website: [www.aphasia.org.au](http://www.aphasia.org.au)

AAA is a support and advocacy association for people with aphasia (language difficulties), their families and the professionals who help them. They promote and support the participation of people with aphasia in their own communities by generating support networks for people with aphasia and providing information and counselling for people with aphasia and significant others.

### ***Speech Pathology Australia***

Phone: +61 3 9642 4899

Website: [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)

This organisation represents speech pathologists in Australia. It provides access to information and support, and can assist in finding a speech pathologist within your local area.