People with aphasia have difficulty expressing themselves, understanding what others say, as well as difficulties with reading and/or writing. 20-30% of stroke patients have aphasia. Communicating with your aphasic patients can be challenging!

How can you be more effective and reveal that there is a difference between their underlying cognitive ability and what they can communicate

FIRST: Acknowledge Competence “I know you know”

Acknowledge that you know they have something to say but that they have trouble getting it out.

SECOND: Revealing Competence

Get your message IN

- Speak in a normal tone – normal volume and pitch
- Talk in a quiet place – draw the curtain, turn off radio/TV
- Bring up one point at a time
- Use short statements or questions – eliminate unnecessary words that will make the sentence too complicated
- Avoid open ended questions that can’t be answered with yes/no?
- If you offer a choice, be clear on the two options and indicate so with your hands
- Ask your questions in a logical order (general to specific)
- Perform a gesture at the same time the word is spoken – be animated
- Point to a picture (get the binder on the unit that has Supportive Conversation pictorial resources – ask if you can’t find it)
- Write down the most useful key words – PRINT and use BOLD, CAPITAL LETTERS only – use black marker on blank white paper – limit it to a few key words per page to keep it simple and clear
- Draw a picture or diagram with arrows or other symbols as needed on the white paper (with black marker)

THIRD: Help them get their message OUT

- Offer a piece of paper with YES NO ?
- Have pictorial resources handy so they can look at them and point to them
- Have marker and blank paper handy if they can use it and want to use it
- Give them time to process and time to respond, be responsive to their clues
- Try “Can you show me” as a strategy
- Get to know your patient’s best response mode and use that in future conversations
- Leave these communication papers in the room so family and visitors can see them

FOURTH: Verify what you understood along the way

- Repeat what you know so far and ask if that is correct (and offer a piece of paper with YES NO ?)
- Use short simple statements and words; try to expand on what they get out and see if you are still on the same track as them
- At the end of a longer discussion, summarize the conversation: “Let me make sure I understand.”

FOR FRUSTRATION:

Acknowledge competence with “I know you know” or “I know you are getting frustrated” or “I can’t understand what you are trying to tell me right now. But I will come back later (or at ____ time) and we can try this again”. They will feel heard and validated and know you will try again.

These strategies are based on theories and practices from the Aphasia Institute in Toronto and have been taught in Supportive Conversation for Adults with Aphasia (SCA™) workshops in Sudbury, Sault Ste Marie, North Bay and Timmins in 2008/09.

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