



Are you a friend to someone who has been diagnosed with aphasia?

Aphasia is a language impairment that happens due to damage to the language area of the brain (usually following a stroke or head injury). Aphasia symptoms are different for everyone. People with aphasia experience difficulty finding words and putting words together in sentences. People with aphasia also can have difficulty processing the language around them, for example reading or understanding spoken language. People with aphasia can find it hard to follow conversations, especially in groups or in noisy environments.

Aphasia is most often sudden in onset, and in this situation, symptoms usually improve somewhat over time. Aphasia can however start very gradually, as happens with Primary Progressive Aphasia (PPA). PPA is a language impairment that happens due to deterioration in the language area of the brain. PPA symptoms usually start small e.g. forgetting the odd word or mispronouncing longer words. As the months and years go by language skills worsen.

It can be uncomfortable thinking of this happening to a friend of yours. It can be challenging to hold onto your friendship, especially if their aphasia makes you feel anxious about how to react and how to help.

We know that social inclusion is an important part of living your best life with aphasia.

We also know that social isolation is very common with aphasia.

“Friends just start to drift away”. This is sadly a common part of the aphasia story.

We want to empower friends of people with aphasia to stay close and genuinely connected.

How you can help as a friend

1. Your friendship is important. Please stay connected.
2. If you live locally and have some spare time in the week perhaps you could schedule regular time with your friend with aphasia – a weekly or fortnightly visit or outing.
3. If you live further away perhaps you can stay connected with regular Zoom calls and occasional visits.
4. Could a group of friends make a WhatsApp group? You could stay connected with photos, text and emojis. You could share funny video clips (the internet is full of them). People with aphasia often retain their sense of humour, even when word jokes become difficult to understand. Slapstick style humour often gets us laughing.
5. Your friend with aphasia may not be as good at initiating social interactions. You may need to take the lead with this. Be persistent and try more than once even if your friend seems reluctant at first.
6. Your friend is still your friend, they are not the aphasia. Even though they may seem a bit different, hold on to who you know them to be.
7. When talking to your friend you can make it easier for them to understand by:
 - Sitting close and facing them
 - Choosing a quiet place to talk. Turn off tv/radio/ dishwasher etc. Pick a café without music if you go out for a coffee.
 - Slowing down your rate of speech.
 - Making sure only one person is talking at a time. Don't talk over each other.
8. Responding to you is harder for your friend. You can help by:
 - Allowing extra time for your friend to respond.
 - Slowing down, relaxing and enjoying time together. Not every moment needs to be filled with talk.

9. Try not to talk **for** your friend, however you can help them out.
- You could ask “Are you telling me about...?”
 - You could ask for confirmation “So you are going away this weekend...is that right?”
 - If you have not understood your friend, it’s better not to pretend you have. It can be tempting, especially when you see how much effort they have put into telling you. It is better to acknowledge their effort and how hard it is. “I know you really want to tell me about this. I’m so sorry I can’t get it just now.”
 - You can agree to let it go.

Photos:

1. Find some old photos of time you had together. You can laugh and reminisce and soak up those nostalgic feelings together.
2. Take photos of important parts of your life and share them when you are visiting your friend. (Your visit to the grandkids, the fancy dress party you went to in the weekend).
3. Take photos of routine parts of your life and share them too. Remember, when we catch up for coffee with a friend it’s not unusual to talk about the gardening and recent trip to the hardware store. We share the little parts of our life with our friends as well as the big parts. Photograph those too, so you can share with your friend what you have been up to.
4. Encourage your friend to take photos of their days too. When you visit you can look through their photos and get a glimpse into their week.

Connecting through conversation may not be what's best/easiest for your friendship now. Can you find other ways to connect?

Some ideas for activities that don't focus on talking:

- Go on a walk or bike ride or a drive together.
- Go to another town and explore the shops and landmarks.
- Do some gardening, cooking or baking together.
- Go out for a coffee somewhere where you can watch things happening.
- Work on a piece of art together. This could be an adult colouring book or something more complex!
- Work on a joint craft project. Do you both knit/make things/mend things?
- Go out to see some live music or go to see a live sporting match.
- Visit a museum or art gallery or go to a movie.
- Join an exercise or dance class.
- Join a new group together- check out the options in your local paper. What is there that doesn't focus on talking/conversation?
- Do jigsaw puzzles, play cards and boardgames.
- Go fishing!
- Watch a TV programme you both enjoy together.
- Try a woodwork project together. Perhaps you could join your local MenzShed?

Even though your friendship may be different, it may be stronger and more important now. Remember the things that brought you together and try to gradually work at weaving your new friendship style into your shared history as friends.

Thank you for reading this! Do get in touch with AphasiaNZ if you have questions. We are very happy to support friends of people affected by aphasia.