

After Stroke Peer Support Toolkit



A Resource To Support Individuals
With Communication Difficulties



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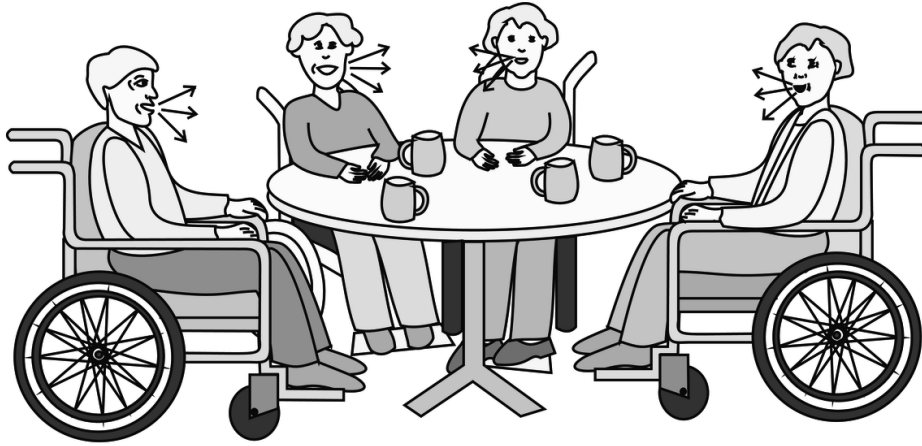
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Making Peer Support Groups Accessible For People With Communication Difficulties

The ability to communicate is central to peer support as people engage in conversations about themselves and their experiences.

1 in 3 individuals experience communication changes after a stroke.



It may be necessary to make some adjustments to encourage individuals with communication difficulties to receive and provide peer support.

Here are some ideas:

- Design group activities and discussions to promote active participation from members with communication difficulties.
- Raise awareness and provide strategies to other peer group members to support and empower members with communication difficulties.



How A Stroke Affects Communication

Communication is more than speaking or writing.

It involves thinking, listening, understanding, recalling, and gesturing.

When someone speaks to you, you need to hear the message, remember it, understand it, think of a response, find the right words, create a sentence, move the right muscles, and say the words.

If the stroke affects the part of the brain that controls any of these functions, communication can be affected.



Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs)
work with people with
communication difficulties
to help them re-learn
their communication skills
or learn new strategies and techniques
to communicate.

Important!

Having a communication difficulty
does not affect intelligence.

Aphasia is a loss of language,
NOT intellect.





The Different Types Of Communication Difficulties You May Encounter At An After Stroke Peer Support Group

- **Aphasia**

When a stroke affects
the language centre of the brain
and how a person can communicate.

It can impact
speech, writing, and understanding
in both spoken and written language.

- **Dysarthria**

When a stroke affects
the area(s) of the brain
controlling speech muscles,
therefore the muscles used to speak
are weak or hard to control.

- **Apraxia**

When a stroke affects
the area(s) of the brain
coordinating speech muscles.

A person understands and
wants to speak but
can't coordinate speech sounds.



- **Cognitive Communication Difficulty**

When a stroke affects thinking skills, including memory, attention and problem solving.

A person may interrupt others, have trouble taking turns in a conversation, or change topics often.





Recognizing That Someone May Have Communication Difficulties

Someone with communication difficulties might:

- Use sounds or gestures instead of words (e.g., pointing).
- Use short or incomplete sentences or incorrect grammar.



- Have difficulty finding words.
- Repeat words or phrases.
- Speak slowly with long pauses between words.
- Be unable to understand when people speak quickly.
- Be unable to understand when multiple speakers are talking at once.
- Say one word while meaning another (e.g. saying yes and meaning no, or saying table and meaning chair).
- May withdraw from the conversation or not initiate participation in the group.



- Need extra time to process spoken or written information.
- Have challenges understanding or using numbers (e.g. calculations, telling time).
- Have difficulty writing, typing, or spelling words.



Helping Members Of The Group With Communication Difficulties

In the next few sections,
we have provided
information and strategies that
you can use to support members
in your group who may have
communication difficulties.



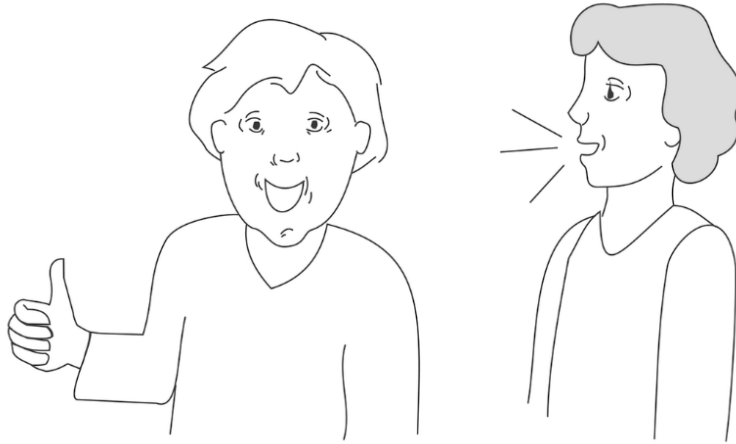
How To Learn About The Needs Of Members With Communication Difficulties

- Talk to new members during registration or orientation to find out if they have any difficulties with communication.
- Ask members who may be experiencing communication difficulties if they have worked with an SLP and welcome them to use new strategies they have learned to communicate.



- Check in with members who may be experiencing communication difficulties during group meetings to understand the strategies and techniques that work for them.





Encourage People With Communication Difficulties To Participate

When promoting your group,
indicate that you welcome individuals
with communication difficulties.

For example: “We welcome members
who experience communication difficulties
resulting from stroke.”



**When planning your meeting topics,
include topics related to:**

- Common communication difficulties after stroke.
- Supportive communication strategies.

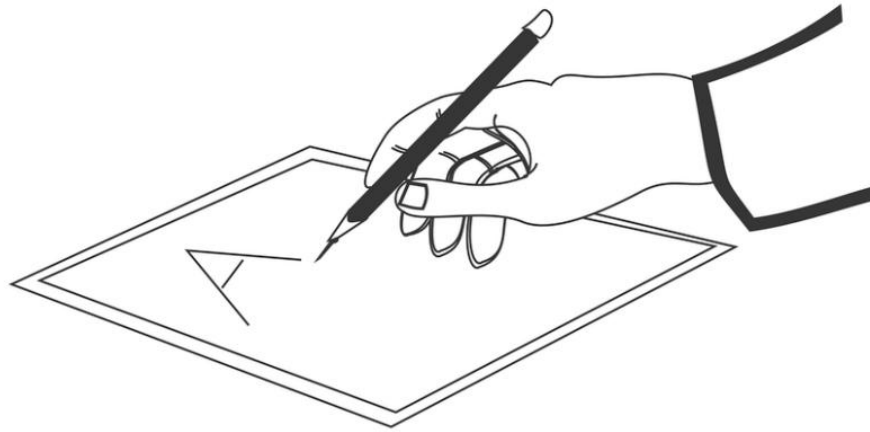
Consider including a person with communication difficulties in the early stages of designing a peer support group.

Having diverse perspectives can help ensure that the group is inclusive.

For more details on how to design a peer support group with people with lived experience look at this toolkit:

www.afterstroke.ca/resources/.





Making Written Information Accessible For People With Communication Difficulties

Participation in a peer support group may involve reading sign-up sheets, consent forms, emails, brochures, presentations, or social media posts.

You can use the following supportive communication strategies:

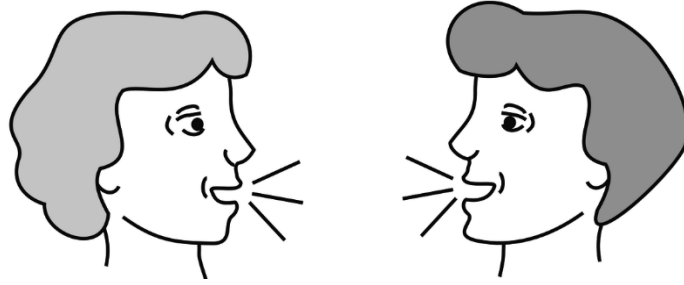
- Ensure lots of white space is used around the written message.
- Short messages using simple everyday language.
- Organize relevant information under a heading.
- Stay on one topic at a time.
- Include pictures to help explain words.
Use clear pictures that are self-explanatory and relatable.
- For typed documents use a Sans Serif Font like Verdana or Arial in 18-point font or larger.



- Avoid use of italics and underlining.
- Use bullet points for lists.
- Offer more time to read.

Share these tips with guest speakers, volunteers, and other individuals who will communicate with group members.





Ways To Help People

Understand Spoken Language

- Ensure the environment is free of distractions.
- Speak clearly.
- Use a relaxed pace of speech.
- Use face-to-face communication.
- Use keywords. While someone is talking, write (or type) the main words of what is being said on a white board or flip chart.

- Use adult tones
(do not speak to group members like children).
- Write each topic of discussion
on a white board or flip chart
to help members stay on topic
and to support members who have
challenges with short term memory.
- Use a seating arrangement where
members are facing each other.
This allows people to observe
and understand through visual cues
such as body language and expressions.
- Regularly ask the group
if they understand and
if they have any questions.





Ways To Help People

Share Their Thoughts And Ideas

- Provide extra, uninterrupted time for people to communicate.
- Watch for non-verbal cues, including body language.

- Share agendas and topics of discussions beforehand to allow members time to think of how they would like to participate.
- Reduce background noise and distractions.
- Use a mix of open-ended questions.
(What did you do on the weekend?)
and choice-based questions
(Did you stay at home? – yes/no?)
to stimulate conversation.
- Ask individuals if they would like a turn to speak.
- Encourage members to bring communication aids, if they have any.



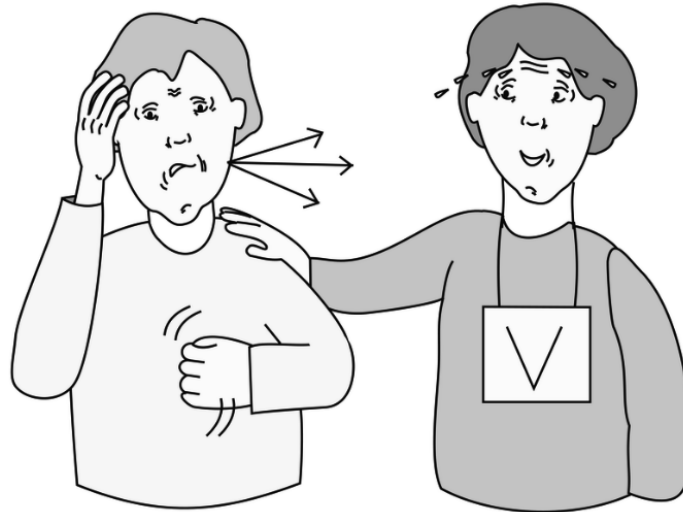
Ideas For Communication Aids

- Paper, pencil, or markers.
- Cue cards, magazines, or photographs.
- Alphabet letter charts.
- Technology (e.g. tablets).
- Communication Picture Book

like this one from Stroke Association UK:

https://www.stroke.org.uk/communication_picture_book_community_guide.pdf





Ideas To Help Members Who Are Having Trouble Speaking

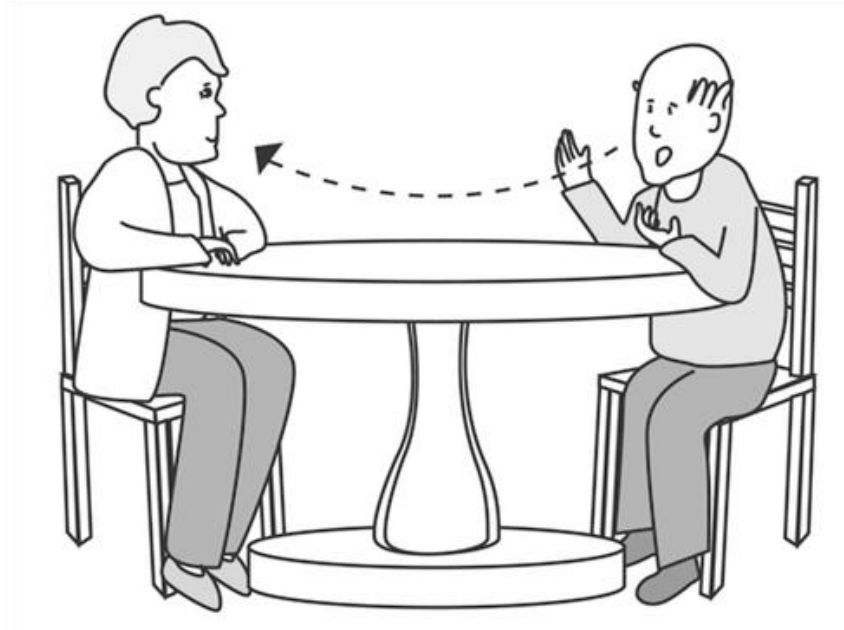
Encourage members who are having trouble speaking to:

- Take their time.
- Use visual aids.
- Use pictures or drawings.

- Use gestures.
- Use other words to describe the ideas/feelings.
- Speak one at a time.

Consider using a talking stick
or turn taking to encourage
equal participation among members.





Recommendations That Can Ease Communication

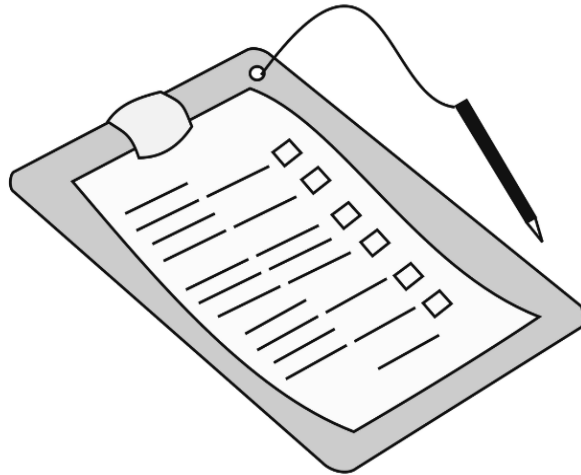
- Listen patiently. Some people may need more time to say the things they want to say.
- Speaking slowly and clearly.
- Try not to interrupt.

- Address people directly.
Talk to your group members and not their support staff or caregivers.
- Understand that some people may speak in short phrases or single words or use sounds or gestures to communicate.
- Connect with members during coffee break to interact on a 1-to-1 basis.
- Understand that people who have difficulty communicating also have important things to say.
- In a peer support group, people should feel comfortable without being centered out.



- Individuals with communication difficulties may be withdrawn from the conversation or may not initiate participation in the group. They may be misinterpreted as being introverted when they are experiencing communication challenges.
- Encourage participation from all group members.
- Create a welcoming, respectful, and understanding environment.





Important Takeaways

- Modifying the design of the group and including the tips in this guide can reduce communication barriers and may help participants share their experiences.
- Everyone involved in a peer support group can use the tips included in this resource.

- March of Dimes Canada has other training materials which can help you learn new ways to create a peer support group which is inclusive of members with communication difficulties.

Contact your Volunteer Engagement Coordinator

OR email us at afterstroke@marchofdimes.ca

OR call us at 1-888-540-6666.



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Disclaimer

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