

# We can all help to improve communication for people with disabilities

August 28 2018, by Bronwyn Hemsley

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Co-author Harmony Turnbull with Fiona Bridger, who has cerebral palsy and uses a speech generating device. Bronwyn Hemsley. Credit: The Conversation

Around 5% of the population, or 1.2 million Australians [have a communication disability](#). Communication disability can arise if a

person has a health condition affecting their speech, language, listening, understanding, reading, writing, or social skills.

Communication disability can be lifelong (as for people with cerebral palsy or intellectual disability) or acquired (as for people with stroke and [aphasia](#), [motor neurone disease](#), or traumatic [brain injury](#)).

All people need to be able to communicate in order to work, build relationships, and seek the [support](#) they need. But they will [encounter many barriers to taking part and being included](#).

About [30%](#) of stroke survivors have [aphasia](#), a condition that affects their use of language. Over time, being excluded from conversation erodes social contacts and opportunities for conversation, resulting in loneliness and isolation, depression, anxiety and fear.

People with aphasia [report feeling alienated, inferior and shamed](#). They might have difficulty speaking, but are still aware of the world and conversations that happen around them and [want to contribute](#).

Supportive communication partners can [do a lot to help](#) improve communication [access](#) for people with communication disability.

## **1. Remove communication barriers**

People with communication disability often report others treat them as though they're stupid. This negative attitude or expectation is a barrier to [communication](#).

Regardless of their speech abilities or cognitive skills, everyone has the right to communicate. So treat them the same as you would any other person, talk directly to them, and ask them questions.

## 2. Prepare for communication success

- Communication disability is "invisible", so ask the person or their close ones about how they communicate and what helps them to get their message across
- keep background noise and distractions down, and give the person your full attention
- use facial expressions and gestures to help to convey information, particularly if the person has difficulty understanding speech
- give the person more time to respond, and get comfortable with silence while you [wait](#) – the perfect pause takes a little longer than you might be used to, so try counting to ten in your head and leaving that space
- stay attentive and off your phone, unless you're using the photos or video feature to help. Try using some little words such as "yes" and "mhm" to [indicate acknowledgement and show active listening](#). This can help reduce the frustration and anxiety that comes from struggling to find the right words to say
- if the person uses communication technologies, watch what they're doing and respond as you would usually. It's just another way to talk.

## 3. Build a conversation together

It takes at least two people to have a conversation, and supportive communication partners to [make it a successful one](#). Give and take turns in a conversation to show respect and interest in what they have to say. If they're struggling, give a cue or a prompt to help the person think of a word. If you haven't understood the person, don't pretend. Let them know you'd like to keep trying.

A person's [cognitive-communication skills](#) can grow when they

experience more opportunities for inclusion in social situations, employment, and education.

People with traumatic brain injuries can also learn [strategies](#) to improve their chance of success in conversation. Learning to plan the topics that need to be covered in a conversation, speaking slowly to encourage others to slow down, and finding a quiet place for that important conversation can all help.

#### **4. Use communication aids and alternative strategies when you talk**

Communication involves more than spoken [words](#). We can also communicate with gesture, facial expression, body language, and tone of voice. Learn how you use your own non-verbal communication, and try to pick up on [other people's cues](#).

The use of sign language, writing, and drawing can all assist someone with communication disability to understand, and express themselves. [Key Word Sign](#), a system for using hand signs and gestures as you speak, uses signs from [Auslan](#). The idea is to encourage language use and growth, and help people understand the meaning in a sentence. You can use the online [Auslan Signbank dictionary](#) to learn some of these signs.

Speech devices are technologies designed to help [everyone](#) communicate. But having a speech device and knowing how to use it is only the start.

It takes persistence and [a keen sense of humour](#) to navigate a world in which people can respond [inappropriately](#) when you use the technology. People with communication disability ultimately need a willing and responsible community to access their [communication rights](#).

Communication access in any environment paves the way for people with communication disability to engage, interact, and take part – to be involved in whatever is going on. It's just as important as physical access for people who have a physical disability.

So next time you meet someone with a [communication](#) disability, find out how they get their message across, and try having a conversation.

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