

The Sounds of Silence

RELATING TO PEOPLE WITH APHASIA

You. Yes, you. You are likely one of millions of Americans who can communicate without difficulty. I am not one of you. I am like more than 1 million other Americans who live with aphasia. I have difficulty putting my thoughts into words (expressive aphasia) and understanding the words of others (receptive aphasia). Expressive aphasia means that while I can think of the point I want to

make, I have difficulty finding the words to express it. Sometimes I mix up words or use the wrong meanings of words. It is frustrating not to be able to put words together so others understand me. Receptive aphasia involves the ability to process what is being said. Although people with aphasia may be able to understand the general meaning or message, they may have difficulty understanding sentences. For example, when

ABSTRACT

For people with aphasia, the struggle to communicate creates powerful emotions, such as anger and frustration, and feelings of isolation and depression. The author, who has had aphasia for more than 25 years, calls on health care professionals to relate to people with aphasia with patience, active listening, and motivation for success.

JOHN A. LIECHTY, MSW, WITH JENNIFER BUCHHOLZ

someone says, "Where should we go?", a person with aphasia might hear, "Where should me go?" The slightest change can cause a great deal of confusion, making communication difficult.

MY WORLD WAS SHATTERED

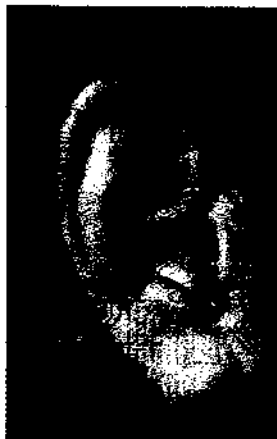
So why wasn't I blessed with the same gift you probably take for granted? Here is my story. More than 26 years ago, I graduated with a master's of social work degree and was about to start my first day at my first job when I suffered an aneurysm, which resulted in aphasia. My world was devastated. I, too, had taken the gift of communication for granted. All of a sudden, I had difficulty form-

have aphasia. Currently, I am dedicated to increasing awareness and understanding of aphasia. I have spoken at numerous conferences and have published an article in *Rehabilitation Nursing* (Liechty & Garber, 2004). I am on the advisory board of the National Aphasia Association (NAA). My purpose is not only to educate, but also to offer guidance and support.

STRIVING TO COMMUNICATE

The ability to communicate is a basic human need. For people with aphasia, the struggle to communicate creates powerful emotions, such as anger and frustration, and feelings of isolation and depression. People with aphasia feel cut

side a soundproof room. Your only chance for survival is for a person on the other side to open the door. How would you get their attention? How could they understand you if they could not hear you? Let me add another obstacle. They don't speak your language, and you don't speak theirs. Now how would you communicate? Would you use your hands and facial expressions? How long until you or the other person become frustrated and quit? This scenario is not a pleasant one, but it highlights the difficulty of trying to understand another while trying desperately to have them understand you. Both people in the scenario are intelligent, maybe even educated, yet cannot express themselves freely. Each faces some



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ing words and thoughts and could not understand what the people closest to me were trying to say. My thinking was gone. My ability to speak was gone. My world was shattered.

The most frustrating part was that I was surrounded in the hospital by intelligent and educated individuals who did not seem to understand my condition. This point is what compelled me to write this article. I write in hopes that I may help others comprehend aphasia and provide insight about how to deal with people who

off from society simply because they lack the ability to express themselves verbally. Aphasia does not diminish a person's intellect. People with aphasia are intelligent people fighting daily to express ourselves. However, we feel like outcasts and occasionally are treated as such. We become angry, simply because we have lost our independence, and at times, it feels as though no one cares.

Some may say we bring these feelings of isolation on ourselves. To them I offer the following scenario. Imagine being trapped in-

of the same struggles people with aphasia face daily.

WHAT CAN HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS DO?

So how can health care professionals help? How does one deal with a person who has aphasia? The answer is simple: patience. Take time to listen. Do not interrupt us or finish our sentences. Just wait and listen. Encourage us, and celebrate with us when we are successful. The bottom line is that both health care professionals and clients are responsible for

giving their interactions their full attention and for celebrating together any measures of success. Aren't these the basic concepts for health care—patience, active listening, and motivation for success? Why are they so often neglected? Maybe it is because of fear; fear of not knowing how the person must feel, fear of doing or saying the wrong thing, fear of seeing firsthand the loss of what we take for granted everyday.

Whatever the reason, fear may be the only thing that separates us. However, don't mistake what I have written to mean that I do not experience fear. I have faced fear every day for the past 26 years. I am simply trying to say that it is because of fear that people with aphasia are left alone and unable to communicate. It is difficult to have a two-way conversation with yourself.

Another area that has been helpful for myself and others is an aphasia support group. Currently, I meet once per month with others

who either have aphasia or know someone who does. The importance of meeting and identifying with others like me, who can relate to my personal struggles, has been crucial. Each member offers support and inspiration. I believe everyone with aphasia could benefit from such a group. For those who are interested in more information, I recommend accessing the NAA Web site at <http://www.aphasia.org>, and attending conferences or an aphasia support group meeting in your area. Speech/language/hearing professionals can also be excellent resources.

SUMMARY AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

After my brain injury, it was a long time before I could say anything. In fact, I could sing before I said my first word. Now I work as a housekeeper at a psychiatric hospital and live on my own, but I still struggle with aphasia every day. I have learned how to communicate with others through e-mail

with the help of voice recognition software. I have been blessed with a strong support group, and their encouragement helps me to cope with my aphasia. While I continue to struggle with my condition, I have been able to develop a way of living and communicating with others. This is my wish for everyone who experiences complications in their lives. Communication is one of the most powerful gifts given to us as human beings. Health care professionals must remember that sometimes the most powerful form of communication is silence.

REFERENCE

Liechty, J.A., & Garber, D.W. (2004). Dealing with aphasia: Three simple rules. *Rehabilitation Nursing, 29*(1), 3-4.

Mr. Liechty serves on the advisory board of and volunteers with the National Aphasia Association, and Ms. Buchholz is a nursing student, Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana.

Address correspondence to John A. Liechty, MSW, National Aphasia Association, 1212 Wilson Avenue, Goshen, IN 46526; e-mail: jllechty@verizon.net.



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