

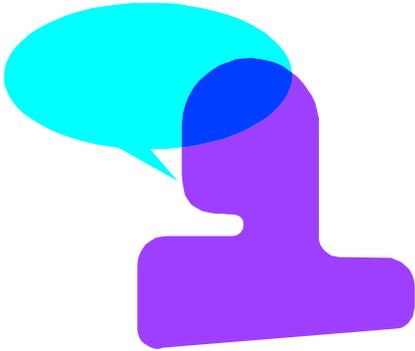
**Language and Communication Problems Following  
Traumatic Brain Injury**

**Patient Information Booklet**



**Talis Consulting Limited**

## Language and Communication Problems Following a Head Injury:



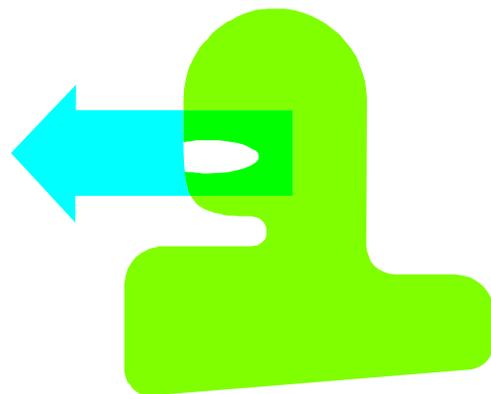
The ability to hold a conversation draws on a number of complex skills which we usually take for granted. To communicate effectively requires an ability to understand what the other person is saying, to work out what we want to say in reply, to recognise an appropriate time to speak, and then to produce the speech sounds we intend to.

This means that effective language requires high levels of cognitive skills (paying attention, planning what to say), social skills (when is it an appropriate time to speak, what is an appropriate remark to make?) and motor skills (moving the lips, tongue and the throat to produce speech sounds). Unfortunately one or more of these skills can be damaged following a head injury. This can result from direct damage to the areas of the brain which are involved in speech comprehension or production; or from more general damage to memory processes, or attentional processes which make following a conversation more difficult.

## What Kind of Communication Problems Occur Following a Head Injury?

Communication Problems following a head injury are not always immediately obvious; the deficits can be very subtle. However common problems can include:

- Non-stop talking or rambling
- Very rapid speech, or 'hyperv verbal' speech
- Problems remembering words
- Talking about unrelated topics
- Interrupting
- Not observing the usual social norms in conversations
- Making up stories
- Difficulty understanding humour, puns, sarcasm and metaphors
- Poor spelling or difficulty learning new words
- Saying the same thing over and over again (called 'perseveration')
- Trouble with forming long sentences



## What Different Types of Language Problems are There?

Due to the complex nature of language there are a number of different types of language problems:



***Aphasia*** – This is usually characterised by impaired production and comprehension of language. It usually results from direct damage to the areas of the brain which are required for language production or understanding. Aphasic problems can loosely be grouped into two kinds, expressive aphasia (problems expressing oneself, not being able to say what you want to say) and receptive aphasia (problems understanding the speech of others, including problems picking up on subtle speech information like the tone of speech, or sarcasm).

Receptive problems may also be caused by hearing deficits which can occur following a head injury, rather than a deficit in language; so any hearing deficits must be identified to allow for appropriate treatment.

***Anomia*** – This describes an inability to find the correct word, the feeling of a word being ‘on the tip of the tongue’ is common, but after a head injury it can occur more frequently.

***Apraxia*** – People with apraxia have difficulty planning the appropriate movements of the lips and tongue to generate the speech sounds they want to make. Here the problem is not so much the production of speech, but rather its delivery. However a crucial distinction to be made is that the muscles of the lips and tongue are able to produce speech, however the person has difficulty co-ordinating the muscles appropriately.

***Dysarthria*** – Individuals with dysarthria have similar problems to those with apraxia, the deficit is in the physical delivery of speech. However dysarthria occurs when the muscles of the lips and tongue are weakened following brain injury, and no longer have the strength or co-ordination to produce speech.

## What Can be Done to Help?

### *Seek Professional Help*

There are a number of health professionals who can help you to improve your language and communication abilities. You may wish to see a Speech and Language Therapist who will help you to overcome problems speaking as well as teaching you methods to improve existing abilities. The role of a speech and language therapist also extends to helping to improve social aspects of life, for example helping work-related difficulties arising from a speech problem.

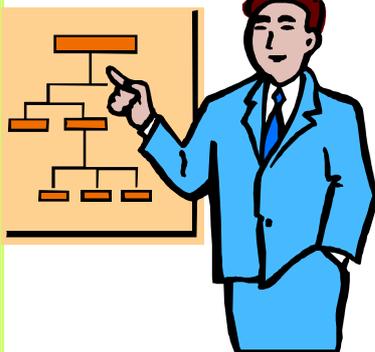
You may also like to consult a Clinical Neuropsychologist. These professionals will also be able to help you with more general deficits in memory, concentration and attention. As speech is actually a remarkably complex skill, improvements in memory and attention can have a beneficial impact on speech and communication.

### How can I Help Myself?

There are a number of simple methods which can help you overcome or work around a language or communication problem. You may wish to try some or all of these methods depending on your individual difficulties.

### *Use compensatory strategies*

A compensatory strategy is anything which helps you to work around problems you encounter. For example: if you can't think of the right word you want to say, go through the alphabet and try and remember which letter is the first letter of the word you want, this may help you to remember the appropriate word.



You might also like to go through your memory in an organised way, using categories and sub-categories to help you find the word you're looking for.

If you still can't think of the right word, then just use another word to describe it or talk around it. Don't get hung up on using the right word, just get your message across.

Finally, you can use signs and gestures associated with the word you're looking for, rather than the word itself.



## How can I Help Myself (Continued)

### *Reduce distractions when you're trying to speak*

If you are in a quiet and relaxed environment, then you will be more likely to be able to concentrate effectively and speech may seem easier. Consider turning off the television or radio when you're trying to speak.



### *Describe contexts if you can't think of the actual object*

If you find you can't remember the proper word for an object, visualise the appropriate scene where you would find that object. Then by describing the scene you may be able to remember the appropriate word, or at least get your message across.



### *Practice active listening*

If you find it hard to understand someone else, concentrate on keeping meaningful eye-contact, watch the person's lips carefully, and pay attention to their body language. This may help you to better understand what the other person is trying to say.

### *Summarise what others say*

If you find it hard to understand or remember what other people are saying to you, paraphrase or summarise what they have said. This will let the other person know whether you have correctly understood or not, and will also help cement what they said in your memory.

Remember that you don't need to use all the correct words in order to communicate effectively. It is getting your message across that matters.

## **How can Others Help When Communicating With A Person Who has had a Head Injury**

The necessary thing about communication is that it involves more than one person. Therefore there are a few things the other member of the conversation can do to help a person with language and communication difficulties.

### ***Pay attention to how you're speaking***

Don't speak too quickly, keep sentences short and even and try not to use too many unfamiliar words. It might also be beneficial to accompany your speech with slightly exaggerated gestures and facial expressions. But remember you are talking to an adult, and so try not to patronise the person.



### ***Keep topics consistent***

Try not to jump from one topic to another unrelated topic. This may make it hard for the person to follow the conversation and confuse them.

### ***Avoid non-literal speech***

Following a head injury, it can be difficult for a person to fully understand metaphors, or sarcasm. If this is the case then avoid using it in the things you say as it can cause confusion and misunderstanding.

### ***Be patient***

Someone who has had a head-injury may speak slowly and have difficulty finding the right words to finish their sentences. Give the person time to speak and avoid the temptation to finish their sentences for them.

### ***Don't pretend you understand when you don't***

If you don't understand something the person has said, then pretending you do will lead to frustration for both people. If you understand part of what someone is saying then repeat back the bits you do understand so that the person doesn't have to go through the whole conversation again.

### ***Actively listen to the person***

You may find that you can better understand the person by carefully observing their emotions, body language and by watching the movements of the lips.

### **Useful Websites:**

**[www.headway.org.uk](http://www.headway.org.uk)**

**- A useful web site with much information about brain injury and rehabilitation in the UK.**

**[www.birt.co.uk](http://www.birt.co.uk)**

**- Another useful web site concerning brain injury, with downloadable leaflets about brain injury and its implications.**

**<http://www.speech.derbys.nhs.uk/CommProblemsHeadInjury.pdf>**

**- A handout with information concerning the causes of speech problems and information about speech therapy.**

