

Communicating with Seniors with Speech, Language and/or Hearing Difficulties

Changes in communication ability can be a part of normal aging. These changes may include hearing loss, word-finding trouble or decreased memory skills.

Consider the following suggestions to help seniors to communicate effectively:

Use of hearing aids and dentures

If the person wears hearing aids or dentures, ensure that they are being worn. Ask the person questions to determine whether the person can hear you adequately. For example, “Is your hearing aid working?” or “Can you hear me?”.

Physical environment

Poor lighting can affect a person’s ability to see facial expression and lip movements. Be sure to provide adequate lighting.

Background noise

Television, radio, music, running water, children playing, or others talking can interfere with hearing or understanding. Turn down background noise or move to a quiet area to talk.

Number of people present

A large room full of people can be overwhelming. Smaller groups or one-on-one situations may facilitate communication.

Fatigue

Time visits when the person is well rested.

Topic of Conversation

If the topic changes quickly or is unfamiliar, it may be more difficult to understand. Start with general or casual topics first. Familiar topics can give the person a chance to reminisce.

Emotional state

Misunderstandings are more likely when the person is upset or stressed. Conversations, particularly about sensitive topics, should be deferred until the person is calm and unhurried.

Type of questions used

Sometimes a person will struggle to answer an open-ended question. Ask yes/no questions, or give a choice (e.g., “Would you like a sandwich or soup?” rather than “What do you want for lunch?”).

Eye contact

Ensure you make eye contact. This shows that you are interested. It also helps if the person needs to watch your face for information.

Be patient

It may take longer for the person to respond to you. Give him/her time to respond to your comments/questions.

Getting Help

If you suspect a problem, consult a Registered Speech-Language Pathologist (R.SLP) or Registered Audiologist (R.Aud). To find a practitioner:

- Contact HEALTH LINK - Health Advice 24/7 at 8-1-1 or visit: www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca
- Enquire at a Public Health Centre
- Find a private practice SLP:
 - Search the Yellow Pages
 - Contact the Alberta Speech-Language Association of Private Practitioners (ASAPP) website at www.asapp.ca.
- Find a private practice audiologist:
 - Search ‘Audiologist’ in the Yellow Pages.

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