

Communication Changes

The ability to understand (receptive language) and communicate (expressive language) the spoken and written word are two of the most complicated cognitive functions. People make many judgments about others by the way they communicate. A brain injury can change all rules of communication because the exchange of information happens in a new context, complicated by a range of factors that likely seem mysterious to you and your family caregivers.

Communicating in the context of these changes, along with changes to physical abilities and thinking patterns, is like playing a board game with a new set of rules. The goal is the same yet the obstacles to clear communication are different. A message sent may not be clearly received.

The brain controls the ability to use and understand words. Also, the muscles that we use to speak are controlled by the brain. A brain injury can cause changes in a person's communication skills. However, these changes vary from person to person.

As a social being, a person's communication skills are very important in everyday life. Brain injury can affect the following abilities:

- knowing and understanding words
- communicating thoughts
- paying attention
- remembering what was said or heard
- forming ideas into words
- writing, spelling, and reading

A speech-language pathologist can give you more information as well as treatment for specific problems.



COMMON COMMUNICATION EFFECTS

Speech and Voice Difficulties

After a brain injury, damage to certain areas of the brain can interfere with messages to the muscles of the tongue, lips, jaw, larynx, and other areas. The result may be the following difficulties with talking:

- slurred speech
- speaking too loudly or softly
- speaking too quickly

As with other communication difficulties, family and friends can use signals or gestures to tell the person with a brain injury to adjust his or her speech. For example, a finger to the ear could signal the need to speak up, while a finger to the mouth could signal the need speak more softly. If speech is hard to understand because of slurring, family and friends need to be patient and emphasize their desire to understand the survivor when asking him or her to repeat what was said. If difficulties understanding persist and the survivor is able to write, a note might help with the words that are difficult to say.

Expressive Language Difficulties or Word-Finding Problems

Expressive language can take many forms. Occasionally, we all have trouble finding the “right” word for something. Usually the word eventually pops into our heads. For those with a brain injury, this problem can be more frequent and disruptive to their ability to communicate. It is not that they don’t know the word, they will understand the word if it is said to them. The difficulty is in retrieving the word in the moment it is needed. For example, the person may be able to describe a pair of shoes with wheels on them, but cannot think of the term “roller skates”.

Another aspect worth noting is nonverbal language or body language. A person with a brain injury may have difficulty establishing a match between what he or she is saying and what he or she is doing. Most of the time, communication is lost because of this. For example, a person may be saying something positive, but display a negative stance (e.g., folded arms and crossed legs).

Tips for minimizing effects of expressive language and word-finding problems:

- If the word is a noun, describe the object, person, or place. If the word is a verb, describe the action.
- Explain the meaning of the word if it is an abstract concept (e.g., love, happiness).
- Picture the word and its meaning in your mind.
- Family members should be patient and set up a cueing system.
- Use many words instead of a single word. This is called circumlocution and is a strategy speech-language pathologists will often teach.

Problems Following a Conversation

A person who has survived a brain injury will often find it difficult to follow a conversation. He or she might experience the following:

- difficulty paying attention to what is said
- misinterpreting what is said
- being “off topic” compared to others in the conversation

Difficulties following a conversation may be severe or may affect the person only at certain times, such as when very tired. Usually, if a person has problems understanding he or she will also have trouble reading.

LESS COMMON COMMUNICATION EFFECTS

Dysarthria

Dysarthria is a speech difficulty resulting from the inability to use muscles to form words and produce sounds.

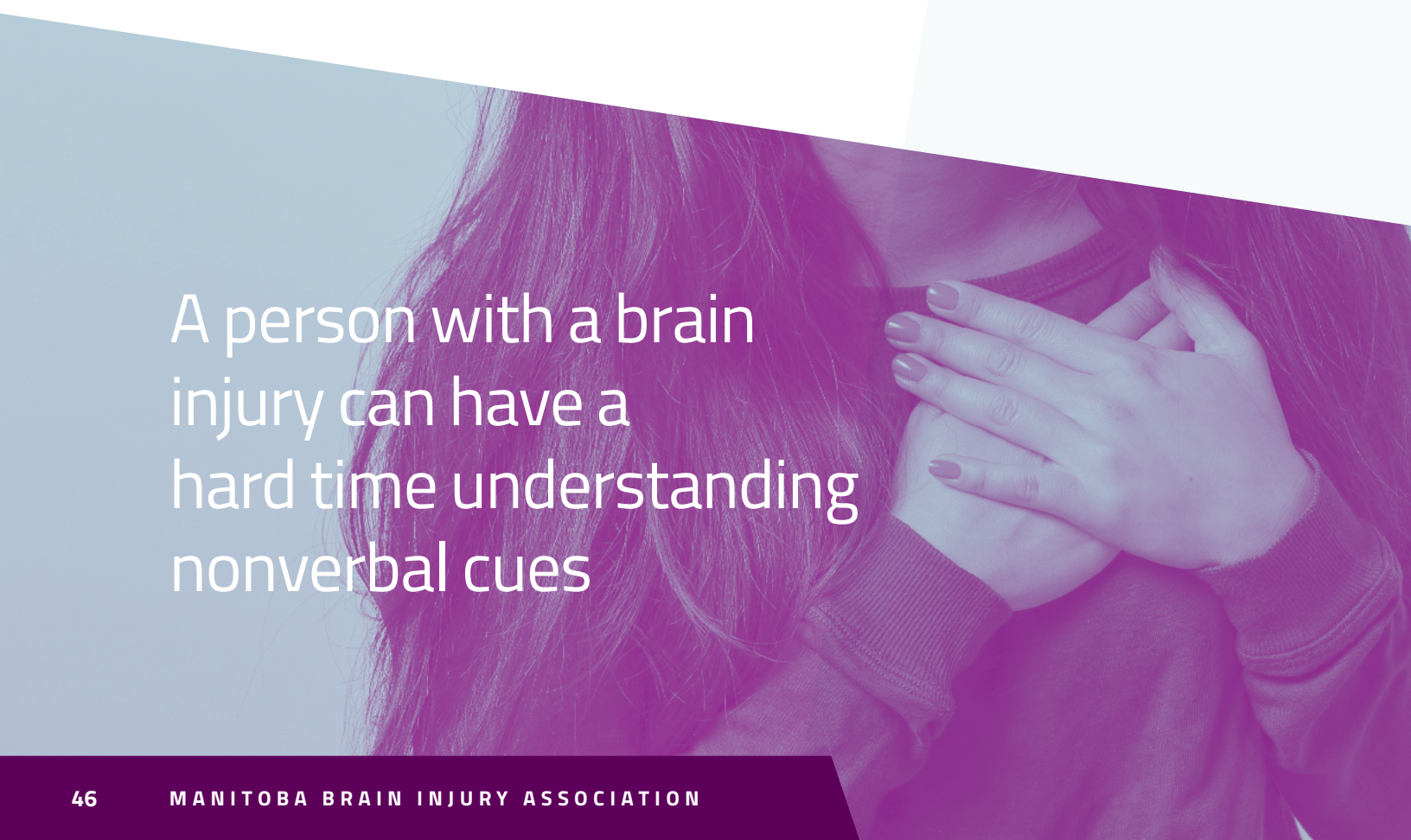
The following are signs of dysarthria:

- speech is often slow, slurred, and garbled
- problems with intonation (varying tone) or inflection (e.g., ending a question with an upturn of voice)

If you are experiencing dysarthria, the speech-language pathologist will give you exercises to improve the muscles used in speaking. Family members can also help you to exercises properly and regularly.

Nonverbal Communication Issues

Language problems can lead to miscommunication and confusion. But nonverbal communication can also be affected by injury. A person with a brain injury can have a hard time understanding nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and hand gestures. The survivor's language and facial expressions might not match what he or she is saying and there may be poor eye contact or staring at others during conversation.



A person with a brain injury can have a hard time understanding nonverbal cues