

SENIOR SCAPE: Aphasia Help

By Sylvia Dickens

In olden days, if you had a stroke, your life was crippled by its affects. Most likely you would spend your final days unable to converse effectively with your family and friends, continue your hobbies or write letters. Fortunately, today that is no longer the case. Medical scientists have discovered that you can rebuild your life but it does take work.

What is aphasia?

Aphasia is caused by an injury to the brain, most often from a stroke and particularly in older individuals. It can result from head trauma, brain tumors and infections, which means people of all ages are at risk.

A person with aphasia experiences impaired language, comprehension and speech, however intelligence is not affected.

This makes the condition frustrating for the individuals affected. They know what they want to say, but just can't find the words.

Comprehension is slowed by varying degrees depending on the person.

Recently, I had the honor of meeting a group of individuals with various levels of aphasia. While obvious signs of stroke and other physical damage were evident, their aphasia was not quite as obvious until they tried to communicate. Some had more difficulty while others seemed to be mildly affected.

The amazing thing about this group was their level of happiness. They joked, they laughed, they gestured. Volunteers who work with them to improve their abilities help make it happen. They provide an informal, casual, friendly and, most important, non-threatening environment. Here, clients receive the help they need in a social gathering with people experiencing the same challenges.

It was inspiring to hear their stories and learn about the condition. It is understandable that a person unfamiliar with the condition could mistakenly think their communication difficulties came with lowered intelligence.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. Over the two hours I spent with them, it was evident that they are brave individuals who are working hard to overcome some extreme challenges.

One young man was a talented musician prior to his injury. Today, he cannot recall the music he wrote or play his guitar, but he's working at it.

Interestingly, some popular childhood songs are completely alien to him. No longer can he recall them. With the encouragement of a volunteer, he eventually was able to add the final word to the song, ? Twinkle, twinkle little ____.? After the song was repeated by the group, his brain suddenly recalled the appropriate word, ?star?.

I asked him if he experiences that sudden recall, and he said yes. We might all relate to this as we strive to recall someone's name. When we aren't thinking about it, it pops into our heads.

One man who arrived with severe communication difficulties worked hard for five years to graduate from the program. He has since traveled the world.

Aphasia program

If you know someone who has suffered a stroke and has problems communicating, chances are that person has aphasia.

The March of Dimes aphasia program was created with the expertise of a speech-language pathologist and communicative disorders assistants who help with program development so that clients can meet their communication goals. People with aphasia are encouraged to seek out their program.

There are several ways to get there: referral by a hospital through the Community Care Access Centre or you can self-refer through their web site www.marchofdimes.ca. Look for links to their programs and the York-Durham Aphasia Centre. That page will provide you with information about the program. Or you can call the Newmarket office at 905-895-3628 x3418

Volunteers needed

Volunteers are needed for this program. Find out how to volunteer on the web site. You will help clients with a variety of strategies: making choices, gestures and movements, visual aids, slow speech, pictures, drawings, newspapers, and keyword hints.

Yoga

Feeling tight? Increase your flexibility, build strength, improve your balance and reduce body stress with Yoga. Classes for beginners run April 14 to June 30 at the Aurora Seniors' Centre; intermediate classes run April 16 to June 18. Register at the

reception desk.