

COMMUNICATION

Communication

Communication is a basic and vital human need that is made up of many pieces, like a puzzle; finding the pieces and putting the communication puzzle together is the goal of speech-language therapy. Sometimes a piece or pieces may be missing and it is the clinician's job to help the person and the family adapt, even if severe injury to the brain makes complete recovery of communication skills impossible.

It is important to remember that every person must be treated as an individual. The course of recovery may vary from one person to another. How much function the person regains, how long treatment takes, and what types of facilities he may enter following acute care depend on the type and extent of the head injury.

Whatever the case, appropriate treatment, family support, and community and government awareness will allow the thousands of people with head injuries each year to realize their potential. Life is precious, and no one knows this better than someone who has seen his world changed in a single second.

RESOURCES

Resources

Center for Disease Control and Prevention
<www.cdc.gov>
800/311-3435

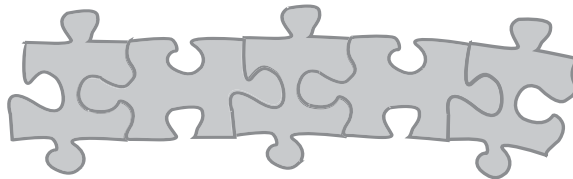
Brain Injury Association of America
<www.biausa.org>
Family Helpline: 800/444-6443

Brain Injury Association of Texas
<www.biatx.org>
800/392-0040

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— Jean Herzog, PhD, CCC-SLP, Speech-Language Pathologist

This information is presented by the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association (TSHA). It is designed to inform the general public about the professions of audiology and speech-language pathology and the help available from these professionals. For further information contact:

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WHEN YOUR WORLD CHANGES IN A SECOND: DEALING WITH HEAD INJURY



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DEAR FAMILIES

Dear Families

(The author uses male pronouns because the majority of people who suffer traumatic brain injuries are adult men involved in motor vehicle accidents. Please be aware that anyone may suffer a head injury and find their world drastically changed.)

More people are surviving accidents as the result of improved medical technology. While many of us may think that a person either dies in an accident or is all right after a few days, the reality is that there is frequently another world waiting for the accident victim and his family.

For the person with a head injury, that world is one of rehabilitation, daily therapy for arms, hands, legs, and mind. Things that once seemed so simple, like eating, combing your hair, and having a conversation, become major accomplishments.

Often it is the problems that cannot be seen that are most disturbing for the patient and family.

While a broken rib or a weak hand can be seen and understood, it is much harder to understand why a person who managed all his own affairs does not make any sense when he talks, or cannot even recognize his own name on a piece of paper.

POSSIBLE PROBLEMS

Possible Problems

The following description of some of the possible problems that a patient may have that affect the ability to communicate; these are the kinds of problems that the speech-language pathologist, as a member of the rehabilitation team, evaluates and treats.

Understanding

The person with a head injury may have difficulty understanding what is said, even though his hearing is adequate. Similarly, he may have difficulty recognizing letters and words, even though he can see fairly well. Even when he can understand what he hears and reads, he may have trouble remembering it and using the information appropriately, such as following directions to microwave food.

Thinking

Although his speech may be understandable, he may have **difficulty thinking of the right words** and may sometimes put them in the wrong order. What he says may not have anything to do with the question or conversation, and the thoughts he expresses may not follow any logical order. When this happens, the person sounds very confused.

Making Judgements

Sometimes he may have difficulty starting to talk even when asked simple questions and encouraged to answer as best he can. Sometimes a person with a head injury may talk all the time, and not pay attention to anyone else. Because he has **difficulty making appropriate judgements** he may say things that make other people uncomfortable. He may even make up stories and tell them as though they were true, not realizing that the events never really happened.

Discussing

The person with a head injury often cannot understand or use figurative phrases; for example, if he hears that someone is a "silly goose" he might wonder why you are talking about a bird. Similarly, abstract thought is difficult, and he may find it hard to discuss things that he cannot see or touch.

Recognizing

He may have difficulty changing the topic, carrying over an earlier thought or comment into the new topic of conversation. For example, if he was talking about his brother, he may not realize the conversation has shifted to the football game and will continue to talk about his brother.

The person's reading and writing may be affected much the same as his ability to understand and talk appropriately. Other behaviors can affect the person's ability to interact; he may not recognize that he has any problems, he may be abusive or very passive, or he may be very easily angered by things that never would have bothered him before the accident.

Swallowing

Other problems that the speech-language pathologist may work on with the person with a head injury include **speech production** and **swallowing**. Sometimes the muscles of the mouth and throat are weak and/or disorganized, causing the person to have **slurred speech** and/or a **weak voice**. Because of this weakness and disorganization, the person may also have difficulty swallowing safely. Since he may not be able to feel food or liquid in his throat very well, he may not cough even though the material may be going the wrong way down into his windpipe and lungs, possibly leading to pneumonia.

