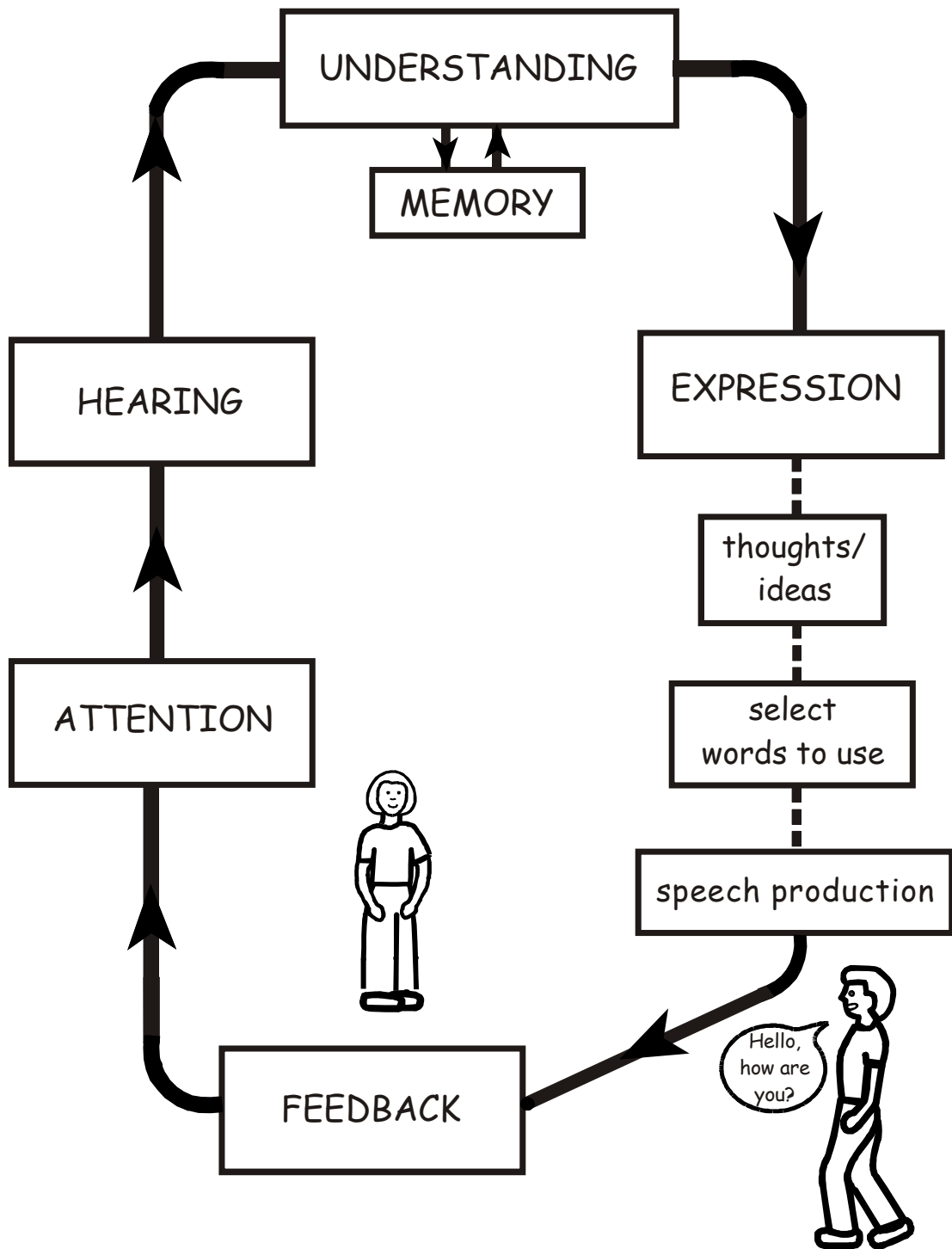


Communication
Chain



Communication Chain

The Communication Chain picture should accompany these notes.

These notes provide information about each component and aims to highlight aspects that should be considered when communicating. These notes largely refer to communicating with people with a Learning Disability however, the information can be applied to other people who have impaired communication. Some people with communication difficulties have problems at each part of the communication chain, other people have problems with only one part e.g. a person may have good skills in attention and understanding, but difficulty in expressing themselves through speech. For communication to be effective there needs to be shared knowledge of the system or systems being used. If the communication partners are each using a different language (spoken or sign), then communication breakdown will occur, not because either person has a communication impairment, but because there is not shared knowledge of the system being used. Using an interpreter will overcome the communication breakdown in this situation.

ATTENTION

Getting and maintaining another persons attention is important for successful communication. Different people have different levels of attention and our attention to anything is affected by what is going on around us and how we are feeling. Some people are able to attend to conversations for long periods of time, others have a very short attention span and can only attend for short durations. Being interested in something means attention can be held for longer, being worried and anxious will reduce levels of attention. Many people become anxious when in a hospital setting and so will find it hard to keep their attention on what is being said.

HEARING

Many people with a learning disability have undiagnosed hearing impairments. This may be a contributory reason why some people have difficulty communicating. Over 40% of people with a learning disability have problems with hearing, this is a much higher percentage than the population as a whole. This hearing loss has not necessarily been detected so you may be working with individuals who are not able to hear you properly.

People with Down Syndrome are at particular risk of developing hearing loss due to having a narrow ear canal, repeated ear infections, premature ageing etc. So some people with a learning disability that you meet will not necessarily hear everything you say to them and their carers may not be aware that the individual has a hearing loss.

It helps, when talking to anyone with a hearing difficulty and particularly with individuals with learning disabilities to:

- Reduce background noise
- Face the person you are talking to, so that they can see your mouth and face
- Use a normal tone of voice and don't talk too quickly
- Use sign, gesture and pictures to back up speech

If you suspect that someone has a hearing loss, they can be referred for a hearing test via their doctor.

UNDERSTANDING

This refers to understanding what another person is saying. Understanding is what goes on inside our heads as we listen to someone else - our brain is processing the information that is coming in. Many people have at least some difficulty in understanding. When meeting a person for the first time, it is not necessarily obvious exactly what that person does and doesn't understand.

Many people with a learning disability understand some, but not all, of what is said to them. The following are areas of difficulty in understanding often experienced by people with a learning disability.

- **Long sentences** can be very difficult to understand. If there are too many important words or key words in a sentence that may be too much information for the person to process. The number of important words or key words in a sentence should be kept to a minimum e.g. one or two key words per sentence.

Try to give one bit of information at a time. Allow time for the individual to take this in before giving the next bit of information.

- **Vocabulary** - unfamiliar words will not be understood. People will not necessarily understand words referring to medical procedures etc if they have not been exposed to them before.

- **Negatives** i.e. words such as 'no' 'not' 'can't' 'won't' may not mean much to the individual, using a phrase such as 'You can't go home yet' may be responded to as if you have said 'You're going home'.

Try to use positive instead of negative phrases e.g. 'you need to stay here for a while' rather than 'you can't go home yet'

- **Time**, most individuals with learning disabilities find the concept of time confusing. This does not only mean difficulty in telling the time on a clock but it also refers to difficulty in understanding words connected with time such as 'tomorrow' 'next week' etc.

Symbols and picture timetables are widely used to help indicate to an individual when something is going to happen - seeing time presented visually in this way helps individuals to understand the passage of time. Many people use the idea of 'number of sleeps' to indicate how many days away something is happening e.g. 'after two nights, two sleeps you'll be going home'.

- **Idioms** (i.e. phrases that have a metaphorical meaning and are not meant to be taken literally e.g. 'butterflies in your stomach' etc.) are difficult for most people with a learning disability to understand.
- **Inferences** i.e. inferring meaning rather than saying exactly what you mean, (I'm thirsty = I'd like a drink please). We often use inferences in communication, particularly when giving painful or difficult information, in order to try and reduce the impact of that painful information for the person who is hearing it. However a person with communication difficulties may not pick up the inferred information and may therefore not fully grasp the intended meaning of what was said.

Avoid using too much inference - say what you mean even if this seems a blunter way of putting things than you would normally use.

Individuals with a borderline learning disability will understand most of what is said to them, particularly on subjects familiar to them. However, these individuals may still have problems with understanding idioms and inferences. They may also have problems understanding complex issues regarding e.g. choice of treatment, especially if they are anxious and upset.

Although these individuals usually have good verbal ability i.e. are able to express themselves through speech, it still helps to present things visually. This can be done by writing things down, backed up by the use of diagrams and pictures to explain things. Being able to see things this way helps the individual to process things and remember what has been said to them, so that they have a better chance of making an informed choice.

UNDERSTANDING AND EXPRESSION ARE DIFFERENT SKILLS

EXPRESSION

Expression refers to the means by which each of us communicates our ideas, thoughts and feelings. In order to express ourselves intentionally we need to put our thoughts and ideas into words, symbols, gestures etc that will be understood by others.

People with a learning disability may express themselves through the use of:

- Speech
- Sign
- Communication books containing symbols/pictures
- Electronic communication aids
- Gestures
- Body language

Many people use a mixture of these methods and not just one method.

Whatever method the individual is using, it is important to give the person time to get their message across. It can be hard to understand what some individuals are trying to express, you may need to ask for help from a carer. Other individuals can express themselves very clearly. The types of messages that people are trying to get across fall into one of a few categories, i.e.:

- Making contact with someone (human contact and social interaction is important to everyone, it is part of being in a social world)
- Asking for information i.e. asking questions
- Giving information
- Expressing feelings,
- Expressing 'likes', 'dislikes', making a choice
- Expressing humour

Understanding and expression are linked but different. They can be assessed separately. An individual may be able to understand more than they are able to express, or vice versa.

MONITORING FEEDBACK

This refers to monitoring the other persons reaction to what is being said and adjusting communication accordingly e.g. by watching facial expression to try and determine whether or not the individual has understood what has been said, what they feel about it, and to be aware of when they want to say something etc.

In the event of an individual being required to give informed consent to an action or treatment the following should be taken into account. It is not always clear whether or not a person has understood what we are saying. Sometimes there are clear signs that a person has not understood e.g. the person may

- Walk away
- Become withdrawn
- Stop making eye contact
- Become agitated
- Not respond in the way we would expect them to

At other times it may be less clear that a person has not understood what has been said e.g. A person may nod, or say 'yes' at appropriate points because they feel that is what is expected of them, but may not actually understand fully what has been said - these expressions do not imply understanding. To ensure a person has understood what is being said, it may be appropriate to check out their understanding e.g. by asking them to recall what has been talked about, or asking open-ended questions. An open-ended question is one which requires an answer other than 'yes' or 'no'. A question such as 'what do you want to drink?' is open ended, whereas 'Do you want coffee?' is a closed question.

If you are aware that the other person has not fully understood what has been said, it may be useful to employ one of the following **Repair Strategies**, i.e. a strategy to repair communication breakdown.

Repeat the key words or ideas

Some individuals use long sentences that can be difficult to understand. Aiding understanding can be achieved by repeating key words of the sentence to indicate what the main idea is:

- e.g. "You are going to have chemotherapy treatment, this will help to reduce the size of the tumour, which will help to make you feel better"
"You will have treatment to help make you feel better"

Rephrasing

Some individuals, who have difficulties conveying messages to others, often repeat the phrase or sentence over and over. Both the individual and the listener can become frustrated. Changing the way the sentence is said sometimes help i.e. re-phrasing

- e.g. "You can wait here for a while before going for lunch, then come back later"
"Can you come back here after your lunch" or " Have lunch and come back"

Using gesture/signs

Use of gestures or signing the key words, to back up our speech, help convey the meaning of what is being said even when the words themselves aren't clear. Pointing can help even for people who aren't able to use gesture/sign.

- e.g. describe by pointing to things, or miming an action while saying the word (e.g. ironing)

Write / draw

If people are able to write a key word for what they are saying or draw a picture, these can also help get a message across.

Change the word

By providing individuals with a vocabulary base enables them to be able to think of other words when a person isn't able to understand a particular word they are saying.

- e.g. help develop an individuals vocabulary base;

Describe things by function

- e.g. CUP - to drink from
TREATMENT BED - to lie on

Describe attributes/features

- e.g. AMBULANCE - goes fast, has flashing lights, takes poorly people to hospital

Describe by category

- e.g. CHEMOTHERAPY - it is a treatment

If it is still difficult to understand some of a person's speech when they are talking to you, encourage them to use gesture, sign or total communication aids to communicate back to you.

Main points to remember:

- Relate to the here and now. Time is a difficult concept for many people. Talk through what is happening as it is happening.
- Use open not closed questions. Check someone's understanding by asking questions that require something other than a 'Yes/No' answer and ask for feedback.
- Give people time to reply. It may take longer for some people to process information, understand what has been said, and express a response.
- Use as many methods as possible to back up speech. Total

communication tools can help to maximise communication.

TOTAL COMMUNICATION

Total Communication is the use of speech, signs, symbols, objects, picture, photos, facial expression, body language etc to **BACK UP WHAT WE SAY** to help convey information, alongside speech, not instead of speech. Facial expression, body language and tone of voice must **MATCH** what we are saying.

Total communication aids or tools are often made up of symbols, photos, pictures and text that can help with communication because they provide a permanent record which helps people remember things. People can keep referring back to information presented visually, they don't need to try and remember it all in their heads. Helping people to understand and express themselves more easily, through whatever means possible, will increase their confidence and self-esteem when talking with others.

Communication involves all the stages of the communication chain and problems can occur at any stage in the chain.

People may have **difficulty maintaining attention**, visual materials used in Total Communication tools can help to sustain attention.

People may have **difficulty understanding** what is being said them. Some clues can help people understand what's said e.g. facial expression, body language, pointing, eye pointing, tone of voice and gesture. Remember that clues, especially gesture, need to **MATCH** what we are saying. Back up what you are saying with Total Communication tools to help maximise understanding. People feel more in control and less anxious if they don't have to guess what you are saying.

People may have **difficulty expressing** themselves. People who have difficulty understanding may also have difficulty expressing themselves. They may have little speech or speech that is unclear. They may not know the words or may find it hard to find the words or put into words what they are thinking and feeling. Other people may have good understanding but difficulty expressing themselves. Focusing on speech alone may inhibit communication, which may reinforce a feeling of failure or frustration because of difficulties experienced. Total Communication tools can help to give people a way of expressing themselves.

Total communication can help to maximise peoples understanding of what's being said and expression of their message.

By using Total Communication you are using every available means to communicate therefore maximising an individuals opportunity to take part in decision-making.

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