

COMMUNICATING WHEN WORDS ARE DIFFICULT

Your needs still matter when speech is hard to access

Words can become difficult during overwhelm, shutdown, anxiety, fatigue, pain, sensory overload or intense emotion. You may know what you want to say but be unable to organise it, speak it or respond quickly.

This is not rudeness, refusal or a lack of understanding. Communication is bigger than speech, and you deserve time and alternative ways to express yourself.

Encouragement

You do not have to force words to prove that you care. A pause, gesture, written message or “not now” is still meaningful communication.

Why words may disappear

Speech and language access can change from moment to moment. The first helpful step is noticing what increases the difficulty and what gives your brain more space.

Possible triggers

Too many questions • conflict or criticism • unfamiliar people • pressure to answer quickly • sensory overload • tiredness • pain • hunger • strong emotion • being watched • needing to explain something complex.

Possible signs

Long pauses • losing familiar words • repeating one phrase • going quiet • looking away • using gestures • feeling frozen • speaking in shorter sentences • agreeing simply to end the interaction.

Reduce demand before requesting more words

Move to a quieter space. Lower your voice. Pause questions. Reduce the number of people present. Offer water, movement, a familiar object or time alone. Regulation can make communication more accessible; pressure often makes it harder.

COACHING PROMPT: What usually happens just before my words become difficult, and what helps me feel safer?

Communication does not have to be spoken

Prepare several options while you are calm. A method may work one day and not another, so choice matters more than finding one perfect tool.

Writing Text, notes app, paper, email or typing in a shared document.

Choosing Yes/no questions, two clear options, pointing or picture choices.

Showing A traffic-light card, emotion scale, body map or pre-written support card.

Gestures Thumbs up or down, nodding, pointing, signing or moving away.

Technology Text-to-speech, communication apps, saved phrases or an emergency screen.

Support person Someone trusted can help relay agreed information without speaking over you.

Make access easy

Keep the chosen tool visible and within reach. Practise using it in low-pressure situations. Tell trusted people what each signal means. Never remove a communication method because spoken words briefly return.

ENCOURAGEMENT: Using another form of communication is adapting, not failing.

Ready-to-use phrases and support

Saved phrases reduce the need to create language during distress. Choose the ones that fit and keep them on your phone, in your wallet or beside your workspace.

- I know what I mean, but I cannot find the words yet.

- Please give me time. I will answer when I can.

- Ask me one question at a time.

- Please write that down for me.

- Give me two clear choices.

- I need a quiet space before we continue.

- I can text this more easily than I can say it.

- I am not ignoring you. Speaking is difficult right now.

For the person supporting

Wait without repeatedly prompting. Use literal, simple language. Avoid finishing sentences unless invited. Do not demand eye contact. Offer options rather than broad questions. Check understanding respectfully. Accept communication in any safe form.

SUPPORTIVE QUESTION: “Would you like time, choices, writing, or someone to help?”

A personal communication support card

Complete this while communication is easier. Share it only with people you choose. Review it whenever your needs change.

My early signs

What others may notice when words are becoming difficult.

My likely triggers

Situations, demands or environments that reduce speech access.

Please do

Actions, language and communication options that help me.

Please avoid

Pressure, touch, questions or behaviours that make it harder.

I communicate through Writing, pointing, apps, gestures, cards or a support person.

Emergency information Who to contact and any essential health or safety information.

A final word of encouragement

Your ability to speak can change without changing your intelligence, feelings or right to be included. Communication partners share responsibility for making understanding possible.

Until next time, give yourself space to breathe. With love, Maggie.