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Introduction

Good communication is the foundation of any successful and positive relationship. Communication assists partners, family, and friends to make decisions, share interests, and support each other. After an injury, communication between partners, family members, and friends often require new strategies and the development of new skills. Improving communication skills can reduce the stress and frustration associated with an illness and/or injury.

Communication is the process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express your ideas, thoughts, and feelings to someone else. Information is exchanged between individuals using words, tone of voice, and body language.



- Vocal tone accounts for 55% of communication
- Body language accounts for 38% of communication
- Words account for 7% of communication

The fear of loss and changed relationships induced by illness and injury can impact communication. An illness or injury that affects communication can present significant challenges for the individual with the illness or injury as well as for family, friends, and healthcare providers providing assistance. An injury and/or illness may cause an individual to question whether or not they can maintain their relationship(s).

For most individuals pre-injury life was routine, familiar, and comfortable. After an injury, open and clear communication is key to helping individuals establish new routines within relationships. Open communication requires flexibility to adjust old and familiar ideas, beliefs, and habits, and to seek new ones. Some injuries may make communication difficult, however obtaining education on the injury and exhibiting patience may boost communication confidence one word at a time.

Please consider using the strategies in this booklet to foster effective communication and to help strengthen intimate, familial, and social relationships.

Relationship Characteristics

Healthy relationships bring happiness, reduce stress, and create opportunities for support and resiliency. Whether a relationship is intimate, casual, or familial, they have similar characteristics; they encourage individuality and bring out the best in people. To help develop healthy relationships, review and use the strategies below to recognize the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Characteristics of a Healthy Relationship

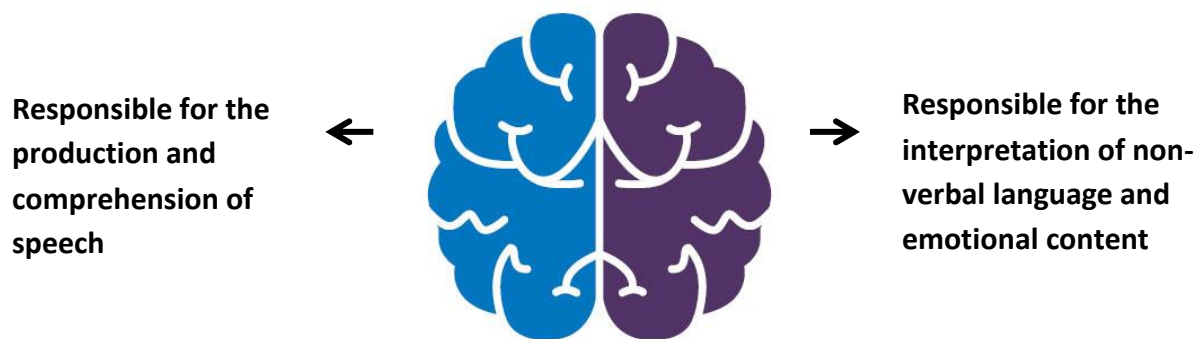
- **Communication:** The willingness to have an open and spontaneous dialogue, and sharing in the decision making and compromising.
- **Shared power:** Making decisions together, mutual responsibility and equal influence in the relationship.
- **Self- Confidence and Personal Growth:** Respecting personal identity and encouraging individual growth.
- **Honesty and Accountability:** The ability to admit being wrong and accept responsibility for personal actions.
- **Trust and Support:** Support each other to achieve life goals. Respect individual feelings, friends, and opinions.
- **Respect:** Express understanding and listen without judgment. Value the opinion of others and balance giving and receiving.
- **Non-Threatening Behavior:** Creating an environment that is safe and comfortable for expressing feelings.

Characteristics of an Unhealthy Relationship

- **Isolation:** Controlling someone's behavior and actions. Limiting contact with friends and family and using jealousy or other reasons as justification.
- **Anger/Emotional Abuse:** Humiliating, criticizing and imposing guilt on someone.
- **Threats:** Making and/or carryout threats to hurt someone. Threatening to end the relationship or hurt themselves.
- **Intimidation:** Using words, actions, or gestures to cause fear. Uses discussions of violence to control your behavior.

It is very important to have a clear idea of how we want to be treated by other people. We all deserve relationships with people who sincerely care about our well- being, respect our opinions, and support us during difficult times.

Traumatic Brain Injury and Communication



The ability to produce and comprehend speech may change after a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). However the individual that is ill and/or injured may not recognize the changes in their ability to communicate. Understanding the challenges associated with a TBI that affect communication is important to maintaining relationships. Individuals with a TBI may find it challenging to produce and understand speech, as well as understanding the emotional context and meaning of conversations. Individuals with a TBI require support from partners, family and friends to maintain social interaction, practice skills, and to provide feedback.

Speech Production Challenges

- The individual can understand language but may not be capable of producing speech.
- The individual has difficulty forming words.
- Speech is slow and slurred.

Speech Comprehension Challenges

- The individual may have lost the ability to understand language.
- The individual may not be aware that they have a problem speaking.
- The individual may get confused when speaking or being spoken to.

Challenges with the Emotional Context of Speech

- The individual may not be able to interpret or communicate emotions (e.g. anger, sadness, and joy).
- The individual may not be able to interpret the speaker's feelings.

Social Communication Challenges

Changes in the ability to produce and understand speech and decipher emotional context can have a negative impact on social communication. Possible changes in social communication after a TBI may include:

- Appearing distressed when someone is speaking

- Inappropriate eye contact.
- The individual is unsure when to speak.
- Incomplete story telling. The individual may start telling stories in the middle or skip around.
- The individual may get off topic when communicating.
- The individual may make up stories or exaggerate.
- The individual may ask inappropriate questions or make inappropriate comments.

Tips to Improve Social Communication with an Individual Experiencing a TBI

- One person should speak at a time to minimize confusion and frustration.
- Let the person know you are interested by maintaining eye contact and listening.
- Verify your understanding by acknowledging what was said.
- Speak slow enough to be understood.
- Allow the person time to think and express feelings.
- Keep on the topic when communicating.



Effects of Multiple Sclerosis on Communication

Cognitive impairment such as slowed or slurred speech, delayed information processing, and decreased memory and attention span is common in individuals with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Changes in speech, language, and cognitive skills; fatigue; visual changes; and limited mobility are associated with decreased participation in overall communication. Confidence, social support, and a comfortable environment increase the likelihood that individuals with MS will participate in conversations. Increased communication participation among individuals with MS is associated with improved health outcomes and healthy relationships.

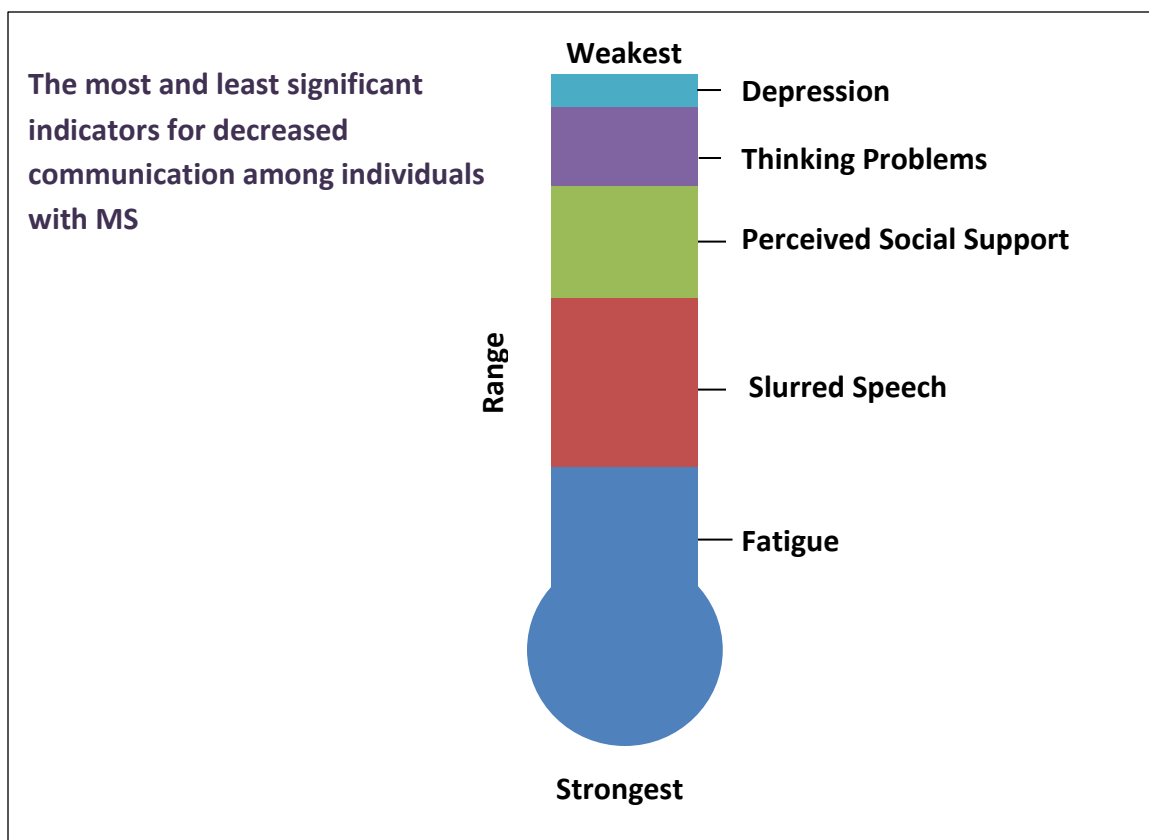


Figure 1: Indicators for decreased communication among individuals with MS

To build confidence and strong relationships and aid in effective communication, please try the following good communication principles.

- Communicate in a quiet area or a room free from distractions and interruptions.
- Acknowledge different communication styles and capabilities. Tailor the conversation and/or topic to the person’s communication and cognitive ability.
- Be flexible. Provide information in different ways (e.g. verbal, written, or body gestures) and at different times.
- Provide emotional and social support during the communication process. Remain patient long enough to repair any breakdown in communication.

Family Communication

Family members communicate to exchange ideas, gain knowledge, and understand one another. Listening well is essential to family communication and vital to being heard in a family unit. Active listening is defined as attentive hearing that focuses on understanding the meaning of the words being spoken. In active listening, judgment is suspended and empathy is used to

understand an individual's experience, feelings, and view point. Communication within a family should include all family members.

Active Listening Principles

To develop and strengthen active listening skills in your family, practice the following six active listening principles:

- **Encourage** - Focus on the person speaking. Keep in mind their needs and concerns. Use gestures or words that show you are listening.
- **Clarify** - Ask questions to confirm what the person has said.
- **Restate** - In your own words, repeat what the person has said.
- **Summarize** - Reiterate the main themes, ideas, and feelings expressed by the person.
- **Validate** – Show appreciation for the person's efforts and acknowledge the value of talking.

Positive Communication Tips

One of the characteristics of a strong family is the ability to engage in positive communication. To encourage the process of sharing feelings and ideas, try the following tips:

- Listen to each other; hear what family members are saying.
- Don't make assumptions regarding feelings and experiences.
- Be honest but not accusatory.
- Accept feelings without being judgmental and avoid being critical.
- Argue constructively; face conflicts honestly and openly.
- Avoid letting aggravation accumulate.
- Recognize that both actions and words have meaning

Family Communication Checklist

How effectively do you communicate with family members? Effective communication enables families to adapt to the challenges of an illness or injury. Good communication among family members helps create a supportive environment and reduce conflict and stress. Engage your family in this activity and compare your perception of your communication skills with your family’s perception of your communication skills. Mark each statement with a true (T) or false (F) answer.

	My Opinion	Family’s Opinion
1. I clearly communicate what I mean.	_____	_____
2. I display empathy when I listen.	_____	_____
3. I ask questions when I don’t clearly understand something.	_____	_____
4. I allow other people to finish talking before I speak.	_____	_____
5. I rarely use sarcasm or insults when I speak.	_____	_____
6. I am willing to listen to the ideas and feelings of others.	_____	_____
7. I don’t get angry or hostile when someone disagrees with me.	_____	_____
8. I am sensitive to nonverbal signals, like body language.	_____	_____
9. I keep eye contact when I speak.	_____	_____
10. I summarize what was said before a response is given.	_____	_____
Total of true (T) responses	_____	_____

The more responses that are true, the more skillful you are as a communicator. Have you identified aspects of communication you can work on? Review and discuss your responses with family members. If there is a significant difference between the “my opinion” column and the “family’s opinion” column, please take time to review the Improve Family Communication Tip Sheet and set a goal to work on two communication skills during the next month.

Improve Family Communication Tip Sheet

- Use “I” instead of “you” phrases to express how you feel.
- Consider your tone when you’re speaking. Pay attention to what you say and how you say it.
- Be attentive when others are speaking. Maintain eye contact, avoid distractions and looking away.
- Communicate frequently.
- Create opportunities to talk with your family.
- Use brief statements, preferably 10-15 words or less.
- Be sensitive to each other’s feelings.
- Avoid being critical.
- Avoid letting aggravation accumulate.
- Accept feelings without judging.



Emotional Awareness

Emotional awareness is the foundation of good communication, positive emotional health, and strong relationships. Emotional awareness involves recognizing and managing feelings, particularly feelings that induce stress. Increasing awareness of emotions can help individuals manage stress and challenges, communicate well with others, and display empathy, trust, and confidence. The lack of emotion, awareness of emotions, and/or understanding of emotions can make it difficult to build and maintain healthy relationships. Emotions influence the

communication process; what you say, what you hear, body language, and feedback. Good emotional awareness is associated with increased optimism, confidence, and satisfying relationships. Visit the [Take Five: 5 Minute Strategies to Support Healthy Treatment and Recovery](#) for a new emotions tool.

How Emotionally Aware Are You?

Ask yourself the following questions to determine your level of emotional awareness. The more “yes” responses, the greater your emotional awareness.

- Can you tolerate strong feelings, including anger, sadness, fear, disgust, and joy?
- Do you feel your emotions in your body (e.g. stomach or chest), if you are sad or mad?
- Are you comfortable with all of your emotions?
- Are you comfortable communicating your feelings openly and honestly?
- Do you pay attention to your emotions and use them as part of your decision making process?
- Do your emotions capture the attention of others?
- Do others know how you feel? Are you comfortable with them knowing?
- Do you notice and care about the emotions of others?

Emotional awareness requires managing stress in the moment, as its happening. The ability to reduce stress allows you to face emotions and regulate feelings. The key to increasing emotional awareness and coping with strong feelings is recognizing your emotions, having the confidence to resolve conflict in a positive manner, and knowing that you are in control of your emotions and that the don't control you.

Difficult Conversations with Loved Ones

Certain conversations can be difficult for some individuals. For instance:

- Asking for what you want
- Sharing feelings and thoughts
- Letting people know you have a problem and need support
- Apologizing
- Declining a request
- Disagreeing with someone else's point of view

Before engaging in a difficult conversation, think about how you would like to be approached if someone has something personal and possibly offensive to tell you. Ponder these points before the conversation:

- Imagine who you want to be in the conversation and consider how you want to come across to the listener(s).
- Remember that it takes courage to speak up and those that do can make a difference
- Be respectful of each person that speaks
 - Do not interrupt while someone is speaking
 - Pay attention
 - Before responding, ask if there is anything else they would like to say?
 - Reflect and paraphrase, when appropriate
 - Express gratitude
 - Continue the conversation until feelings and ideas are clear
- Don't resist what is said, don't justify, don't explain, just hear and understand!
- Be very careful about humor
- Identify the next steps



Why Non-Verbal Communication Matters

The way you listen, look, move, and react communicates how much you care, and how well you are listening. When non-verbal signs match your words, this increases trust, clarity, and support. When your non-verbal signs and words don't match, they generate tension, mistrust, and confusion. Non-verbal communication cues can enhance or undermine communication. Non-verbal cues can repeat the verbal message (repetition), contradict the verbal message, replace and substitute the verbal message, complement the verbal message, or accent an underlying verbal message. When faced with mixed signals, the listener has to choose whether to believe the verbal or non-verbal message. The non-verbal message is considered a natural and unconscious language that projects "real feelings and intentions" and typically prevails over verbal messages.

Types of Non-Verbal Communication

Facial Expressions

The human face can express many emotions without saying a word. Facial expressions are universal. The facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, and fear are usually the same across cultures.

Body Movement and Posture

The way you sit, walk, stand, and hold your head may project your emotions. Your posture and subtle movements can provide hints about how you're feeling and your personality characteristics.

Gestures

Have you ever heard the phrase talking with your hands? Most people express themselves with gestures without thinking. Hands are often used animatedly during conversations and for waving and pointing. Keep in mind that gestures can be very different across cultures.

Voice

It's not just what you say; it's how you say it. When we speak, other people read our voices in addition to listening to our words. The pace in which you speak, how loud you speak, and your tone and sounds (such as "ahh" or "uh'huh") stand out.

Touch

A great deal of communication is done by touching. Consider the messages given by a weak handshake, a tap on the shoulder, a hug, a pat on the back, or tight grip on the arm.

Positive Language

Positive language works to remove negative images and labels associated with an illness or injury. The use of appropriate phrases when writing about or speaking to an individual with an injury or illness will help establish communication based on respect and dignity. When communicating with individuals with an injury or illness, it's important to put the person, not the injury first. Inappropriate phrases and negative language such as "the disabled" and "victim of TBI" are not reflective of individual qualities and categorizes individuals into stereotypical groups. Generalizing individual qualities based on an illness or injury may result in reduced listening and ineffective communication. To encourage positive communication, use the positive phrases listed below.

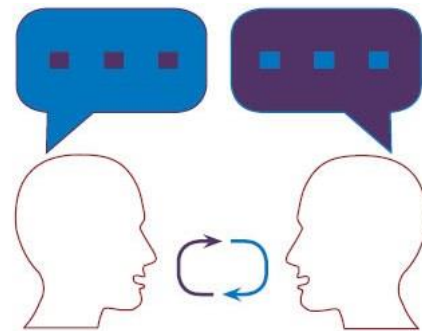
Positive Phrases to Use	Negative Phrases to Avoid	Reasons
Person with a disability	The disabled; handicapped	The positive phrase “person with a disability” focuses on the individual. Negative phrases such as “the disabled and the handicapped” are linked to stereotypes and considered dehumanizing.
Person who Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)	Victim of TBI	The positive phrase indicates the individual has experienced an injury but is not a victim like the negative phrase suggests.
Person who has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	Afflicted by PTSD	The positive phrase “person with PTSD” implies the individual is diagnosed with a treatable medical condition. The negative phrase has a negative connotation that implies permanent sadness and great suffering.
Person with a psychiatric disability	Crazy, nuts, loco	The positive phrase implies the individual is diagnosed with a treatable medical condition. The negative phrase is stigmatizing, offensive and reinforces negative stereotypes.
Person who has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	Afflicted by PTSD	The positive phrase “person with PTSD” implies the individual is diagnosed with a treatable medical condition. The negative phrase has a negative connotation that implies permanent sadness and great suffering.
Person who uses a wheelchair	Confined or restricted to a wheelchair	The positive phrase implies that a wheelchair doesn’t confine people, they help them become mobile. The negative phrase implies that an individual who uses a wheelchair is limited and restricted in general.
Person who has Multiple Sclerosis (MS)	Afflicted with MS	The positive phrase “person who has Multiple Sclerosis” implies the individual is diagnosed with a treatable medical condition. The negative phrase has a negative connotation that focuses on suffering as oppose to the individual. Afflicted has a negative connotation.

Positive Phrases to Use	Negative Phrases to Avoid	Reasons
Slurred Speech	Person with a communication disability	The preferred positive phrase focuses on a single symptom. The negative phrase generalizes and reinforces offensive and negative stereo-types associated with handicapped individuals.
Unable to speak, uses synthetic speech	Deaf, mute, dumb	The preferred positive phrase focuses on a single symptom The negative phrase is stigmatizing and reinforces offensive and negative stereo-types.
Person who is successful and productive	He/she has overcome their disability and is courageous	The positive phrase focuses on the qualities of the individual. The negative phrase focuses on the injury and implies the injury has made the individual inferior and incapable of being productive and independent of the injury.

Communication Feedback

Communication feedback is an opportunity to improve the understanding of a message or conversation. Feedback ensures that clear communication has occurred. It verifies that the message sent was the message received.

Without feedback, the sender cannot measure how effective he/she is as a communicator and the receiver cannot verify their understanding of the message. To provide adequate and effective feedback during communication, use the techniques listed below.



Acknowledgement

Acknowledgement is the desire to be **heard** and **understood**. Acknowledgement indicates you are listening to the words being spoken without judging whether the speaker is right or wrong. Acknowledgement validates the speaker’s emotions, which helps them release information. Failure to acknowledge the speakers emotions may impede effective communication. Use the following phrases to acknowledge the message received:

- What you’re saying is.....

- Let me see if I get this.....
- In other words.....
- I'm hearing you say....

Parroting

Parroting is repeating words back to the speaker verbatim. This confirms that the words transmitted were the words received.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is rephrasing the sender's **message** in your own words to the sender's satisfaction. This clarifies the understanding of the message for both the sender and receiver and that the message sent is the message received. This provides the sender with the opportunity to correct an unintended message and communication error.

Summary

Use the communication tools and techniques provided in this booklet to develop and enhance communication skills and increase awareness of communication challenges experienced by some wounded, ill, and injured members. The strategies are intended to help build and maintain healthy relationships by encouraging effective, open and honest communication in a supportive environment. To help wounded, ill, and injured service members adapt and cope with changes in communication capabilities, explore the resources listed below for additional information.

Resources

- Navy and Marine Corp Public Health Center, [Psychological and Emotional Well-Being for WII website](#)
- Navy and Marine Corp Public Health Center, [Traumatic Brain Injury website](#)
- Navy and Marine Corp Public Health Center, [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder website](#)
- [Relationship Advice and Help](#)
- [Relationship Quizzes and Exercises](#)
- [Social Communication and TBI](#)
- Podcast: [Good communication is a valuable tool](#)

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