

2.4 Managing Symptoms of PSP: Speech and Communication Problems

This Help Sheet outlines the speech and communication problems that some people with Progressive Supranuclear Palsy (PSP for short) may experience. It also outlines the therapies, strategies and aids that can help to maintain communication. The information here is a guide; it is important to discuss all symptoms and management strategies with your neurologist and other health professionals. People with PSP should get help from a speech pathologist, also known as a speech therapist, as soon as problems with speech begin.

PSP is a rare neurological condition affecting the parts of the brain that control walking, eye movements, balance, speech and swallowing. PSP has a wide range of symptoms, but few people experience them all and symptoms vary from person to person. It is a progressive condition, meaning that the symptoms tend to worsen over time. However the severity and rate of symptom progression varies widely.

PSP affects people's ability to move the muscles of the body, including those of the face, mouth, tongue and throat. Speech and communication problems are therefore a common symptom of the condition. There are three broad speech symptoms, which may be experienced singly or all together:

- **Quiet voice and quick speaking: "hypokinetic dysarthria"**

This is a similar problem to that experienced by people with Parkinson's disease. The speech becomes quiet and the person may speak very quickly. Some people may speak so fast that they may develop a stutter, where words or sounds are repeated. The voice may be also become croaky or breathy.

- **Irregular or strained voice: "spastic dysarthria"**

This problem includes a voice which is quiet and strained with occasional explosions into a louder voice. This is caused by the

muscles used in speech becoming tense and stiff, requiring a greater effort to produce a voice and form words and sounds. Speech may also be slow and slurred.

- **Drunken-like speech: “ataxic dysarthria”**

People with this problem can be mistakenly taken for being drunk as the speech can be slurred and it can be difficult to form words and sounds properly. People may have trouble pronouncing longer words correctly due to difficulty coordinating the movements of the tongue, lips and voice.

What is speech pathology?

Speech pathology involves the management and treatment of people who are experiencing problems with communication, swallowing or eating. Speech pathologists work in a variety of settings including hospitals, community and rehabilitation centres, aged care facilities and private practice. When referred by a doctor, some costs may be covered by Medicare and some private health funds offer a rebate for speech pathology.

Where possible, people with PSP should see a speech pathologist with specialist knowledge of neurological conditions such as Parkinson’s disease or stroke.

How can a speech pathologist help?

A speech pathologist can provide individual advice on what is appropriate for your needs and circumstances. They may suggest a number of exercises or techniques to improve your voice. For example: ‘Think Loud’ is a technique to improve volume, pacing or pausing strategies that can encourage a rate of speech that is easier to understand. Speech pathologists may also provide guidelines to people such as health workers and family members/carers so they can communicate successfully.

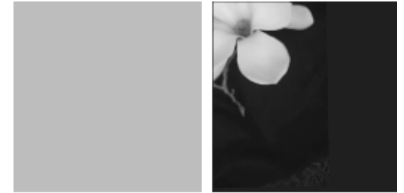
Equipment or aids that can help

Your speech pathologist can advise on a range of aids and equipment that may assist with speech and communication difficulties. These include voice amplifiers, and electronic or manual communication aids.

Independent Living Centres can also provide information and advice about aids to assist with voice amplification and communication. Contact the ILC Infoline on 1300 885 886 or visit: www.ilcaustralia.org.au



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Other communication problems

Speech is only one part of how people communicate; other cues such as body language, facial expression and tone of voice are also very important. The movement problems experienced by people with PSP can make non-verbal communication difficult. For example, people may have difficulty moving the muscles of the face to form a smile or some other emotional response. People may also have problems in making and keeping eye contact due to problems controlling eye muscles. People with PSP may also have difficulty controlling their tone of voice.

Being able to communicate is an important factor in keeping independent and making the most of life. It is important that the people in the person's network of family, friends and health workers understand these symptoms and, for example, do not construe a blank expression or delayed response as disinterest or lack of understanding.

PSP can also cause problems such as slower thinking and difficulty doing more than one thing at a time. People with PSP may take a long time to say something and rushing the response may only make it worse.

Tips for communicating with a person with PSP:

- Keep sentences short and simple
- Try to focus on one idea at a time
- Avoid hurrying
- Allow time for a response
- Reduce distractions; for example, turn off the TV or radio and avoid trying to communicate in noisy or busy environments.

Remember: People with PSP remain mentally aware; they can understand what is going on around them even though it may take time for them to respond.

For further information about these symptoms, see PSP Australia's Managing Symptoms Help Sheets: 2.1 *Movement problems* and 2.5 *Managing changes in personality, mood, thinking and behaviour*.

If speech becomes more problematic

Some people with PSP reach a stage where it is no longer possible to communicate successfully with speech. A range of aids and strategies can help to ensure continued communication. It can be a good idea to introduce these aids and strategies before they are needed, so that both carers and the person with PSP become familiar and practiced at using them. For more information, see PSP Australia's Help Sheet: 4.1 *Managing symptoms later in life.*



For further information about living with PSP, including the full range of PSP Australia Help Sheets, visit: www.psp-australia.org.au

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