

## **Enhancing Communication with a Person with Parkinson's *Tips for Caregivers, Friends and Family***

The purpose of this help sheet is to provide a general overview of communication challenges that can sometimes be associated with Parkinson's disease (PD). It is also intended to provide you – the care partner, friend or family member – with some tools for improving your communications and enhancing your interactions with the person you care about. As PD progresses, some people begin to experience a decreased ability to communicate effectively with others. People with PD can have a great deal of difficulty expressing themselves and caregivers, and others find it equally difficult to understand what is being said. This can be an uncomfortable and frustrating experience for everyone.

**As you read on, remember that everyone is different  
and  
not all people with PD develop these symptoms.**

Some of the reasons people with PD have difficulty expressing themselves include:

- Physical changes such as:
  - Lack of facial expression which can make a person seem depressed or disinterested when they may be neither
  - Decrease in body language
  - Loss of voice volume and voice quality
- Cognitive changes such as:
  - Difficulty concentrating and following a conversation
  - Slower thought process leading to slower responses
  - Forgetfulness
  - Difficulty finding words

It is important for care partners and others to learn new and different ways to communicate in order to stay closely connected to the person you care for.

When communication starts to become difficult, consider some of these strategies:

### **Contacting a registered Speech Language Pathologist**

Communication difficulties can occur at any stage of Parkinson's disease, however more difficulties may arise the further advanced you are. It is worthwhile for those with PD to contact a registered Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) in order to receive an assessment and to

obtain more information. Also note that seeking a registered SLP prior to any signs of difficulty with communication is a great approach to being proactive in your treatment planning.

### **Choose the best time to communicate**

“Off” periods (when medication is not working and symptoms have returned), excessive daytime sleepiness, and periods of anxiety and depression may get in the way of effective communication. You may have to choose your time. “On” periods, when medication is working optimally, can be a better time to have a conversation.

### **Set the stage**

Distractions can get in the way of clear communications. Turn off the TV or radio and avoid multi-tasking so you can focus on listening and talking. Simplify the environment by finding a quiet corner to have a conversation. Avoid large groups whenever possible and strive for one to one conversations.

### **Make sure you are paying attention**

Whenever possible, reserve important conversations until you are able to look directly at each other for a length of time. Make eye contact, pay attention to body language and encourage the person with PD to speak as slowly and loudly as possible.

### **Slow your pace too!**

You may be a person who naturally speaks very quickly. If this is the case, you may need to slow down to the point where you are closer to the pace of the person with PD. This will help the person feel more comfortable by reducing the need to respond quickly. Take a deep breath and keep listening! Silence does not mean that there is nothing happening – there is usually a lot going on inside. Be positive and reassuring and give ample time for the person to respond.

### **Don't forget to consider hearing or vision problems – for both of you!**

Make sure both of you are attending to hearing and vision needs and are using a hearing aid and/or the right glasses.

### **View communication as a partnership**

Avoid over-correcting errors made by the person and avoid completing their sentences. Be mindful that you both have a role in making communication successful. Also, be aware that learning to recognize disease-related changes and learning new communication strategies takes time. Be patient with yourself and with the person you care about.

*Based on a fact sheet developed by Parkinson Society BC: reprinted with permission.*