

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN PARKINSON'S

Many people with Parkinson's have communication challenges as a result of both motor and non-motor symptoms of Parkinson's disease. Communication challenges can also occur during 'on/off' periods of medication use, which affect the person's ability to function and interact with others. The purpose of this help sheet is to provide a general overview of communication challenges in Parkinson's and provide you, the care partner, with some tips.

Symptoms of Parkinson's that can cause communication challenges include soft speech, masked facial expression, and cognitive changes. With respect to cognitive changes, altered language skills, the ability to understand non-verbal cues, and slowness of thought (bradyphrenia) can cause a delayed and sometimes confused response in communication.

The following are some tips for communicating effectively with someone with Parkinson's:

- Choose times when the person's meds are "on" to have important conversations.
- Pay attention to how you are speaking as well as what you are saying. Speak clearly with short sentences and be sensitive to tone of voice, for example, resist sounding impatient or frustrated.
- Give the person time to respond.
- Remain an engaged listener through non-verbal cues like nodding your head, touching the person's arm or maintaining eye contact (if culturally appropriate).
- Encourage the person to speak loudly when giving their response.
- Ask the person how they are feeling or what they are thinking when their facial expression masks their responses.
- Use actions as well as words.

It is important to note that communication challenges may not necessarily mean that someone with Parkinson's has or is developing cognitive problems. Conversely, when someone with Parkinson's has cognitive problems, communication challenges, as mentioned above, may make their cognitive symptoms appear worse. The loss of communication skills due to Parkinson's may hide cognitive changes. In order for health care professionals to determine the cause of someone's communication challenges it can be very helpful for care partners to take notes of their observations.

Consider contacting a speech language pathologist for an assessment and suggestions for improving communication skills. For additional strategies on communicating with a person experiencing cognitive changes in Parkinson's, see our help sheet on these topics.

Sources:

Dementia and Parkinson's Information Sheet, Parkinson's UK
How Parkinson's Disease Affects Nonverbal and Nonliteral Forms of Communication (2010), McGill University, School of Communication Sciences and Disorders (SCSD)