

How to be more accessible for people with communication impairments





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Communication impairments are when a person has a condition which causes difficulties with their ability to receive, send, process, and/or comprehend concepts of verbal, nonverbal and/or graphic symbol systems. There are different types of communication impairments including speech, language, and processing impairments. The impact of communication impairments varies. Some people may find it hard to ask a question, name an object or understand jokes. Others may have impaired speech that make them difficult to understand.

Positive communication

Everyone's needs are varied but there are some common ways you can improve communication with people with communication impairments.

- Gain someone's attention before talking to them.
- Relax! Remind yourself that communication breakdowns are normal.
- Positive body language can be helpful.
- Be honest. Don't pretend that you understand someone.
- Be patient and give someone time. Avoid finishing off someone's sentence for them. If someone doesn't quickly respond to a question, give them a little extra time rather than asking multiple questions in quick succession.
- You can ask someone to **repeat themselves**. You can do this up to twice and then maybe ask them to rephrase it or say it in a different way.
- Paraphrasing can be a useful way to check you have understood someone.
- Avoiding sarcasm and the use of non-literal expressions.
- Break down information into smaller chunks when needed.
- Avoid making assumptions about someone's cognitive ability.

Be flexible

Often the adjustments that someone with a communication impairment may need, are simple things that are just **tweaks** to the way you do things. They may have a preferred **method** of communication. Some people find it easier talking on video calls rather than on the telephone. Others would prefer to type their thoughts in the chat facility rather than talk in front of lots of people. Tiredness and fatigue can be an issue for some and they may just need a few extra comfort **breaks**. Make sure you're **approachable** and have **open conversations** with people about whether they have any access requirements.

The physical environment

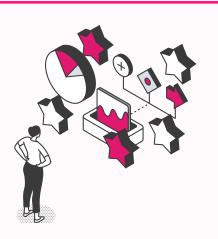
The physical environment can really affect how easy it is to communicate. Some things to think about are.

Reduce background noise



- Close doors and windows or move to a quieter place.
- You can improve the acoustics of a room with soft furnishings, carpets, acoustic panels and ceiling tiles.

Reduce visual distractions



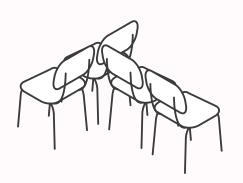
- Having closed or partially closed storage options can help to reduce clutter.
- If there is lots of movement outside, frosted films on windows can be helpful.
- Avoid strong colours and patterned carpets.

Consider the lighting



- The quality of the light and the position can be an issue for some people.
- If someone is backlit their face will be in shadow.
- Have adjustable lighting and be flexible on where people sit.

Position furniture carefully



- Try and make sure that when everyone is seated, they are all at the same eye level and can see each other if required.
- A sitting distance of between 3 and 6 feet from each other tends to be best.

Assistive technology

Some people use communication devices, also known as **augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)** devices, to support them with speech or language. They can be used as well as or instead of speaking. There are a variety of aids available including different software and apps. Be open to people using these devices and any adjustments they may require.

Digital accessibility

There are some simple ways that you can improve digital accessibility for people with communication impairments. Two examples are:

- Having mechanisms in place for identifying specific words or phrases used in unusual ways including idioms and jargon. You should also explain the expanded form or meaning of abbreviations. This could be by explaining what they mean in the text or providing a link to a definition. You could even provide a glossary.
- Having captions and transcripts available can be helpful for some people who have processing impairments.