

Pittsburgh Action Against Rape

Fact sheet on Survivors with Speech/Communication Impairments

What is a communication impairment?

A person who has difficulty communicating verbally because of physical, cognitive or sensory limitation has a communication impairment. Speech and language impairments are highly individualized and range from simple sound substitutions to complete inability to use spoken language. Each person's accommodation will be different and tailored to their unique needs.

When providing services to someone with a speech/communication impairment:

- ◆ Take time to gain a basic understanding of how a person communicates in order to establish rapport and get used to the style and pace of communication.
- ◆ If you have difficulty understanding, repeat what you do understand and ask the person to repeat or clarify what you have missed. This will help you to learn their style and communicates respect for the individual's thoughts and feelings. NEVER pretend to understand something you do not, this feels patronizing and undermines your credibility as a service provider.
- ◆ It can take substantially more time to cover information with someone with a communication impairment. This can require significant effort on both parts. The length and frequency of sessions will need to be negotiated to accommodate this.
- ◆ Communication impairment may be present in wither the way someone speaks (expressive communication) or the way they understand and process new information (receptive communication), or both. Take time to learn the individual's expressive and receptive communication styles.
- ◆ It may be necessary to break communication down into yes/no questions that can be answered with a head shake or ones that require short verbal answers. As with any survivor, leading questions should be avoided.
- ◆ Difficulties with communication do not necessarily reflect difficulties in cognitive processing of information. Do not assume that someone has a cognitive impairment just because they have difficulty communicating.
- ◆ If a third party is providing assistance, do not assume that this person is safe. Ask to meet for a few moments with the person with a disability to

- assess their safety and determine whether or not they would like the attendant to be present during your interactions.
- ◆ Speak and look directly at the person with a disability and not at a third party interpreter or attendant.
 - ◆ If a person uses a communication device it will sound different and take some getting used to. Most communication devices are pre-programmed with a 'vocabulary' of words and sentences. Frequently these devices do not have appropriate or accurate words to describe abuse experiences. You may need to employ a professional who is familiar with assistive technology in order to develop creative adaptations. Contact your local Center for Independent living to find such a professional.

**For more information regarding communications impairments,
please visit:**

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/speechcommunicationdisorders.html>

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