

Tools for talking

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Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is a new subspecialty within the field of Speech-Language Pathology. Clinicians assist persons who can no longer rely on speech or writing as their primary means of expression find alternatives for communication. Perhaps you have seen how Stephen Hawking gives a lecture about black holes, or Christopher Reeve writes a letter in support of research. Both men rely on AAC tools for expression. I have often been called an *argumentative communication* specialist, instead of an augmentative specialist. Those of you who know me, know that both titles fit! I am passionate about this field and the opportunities it offers to persons and their families for more satisfying and successful daily interaction.

AAC embodies a wide range of methods that are used to help people express themselves, including simple techniques as well as complex ones, such as teaching someone to point to the first letter of a word while he/she speaks, using speech generating devices or computers to supplement speech. AAC has helped families see that a communication problem no longer implies that a person is dependent on others. In fact, with AAC, people have improved their quality of life and maintain more independent lifestyles. AAC is used to promote social interaction (Ray can return to the bridge game and bid by pressing a speaking device); foster independence (Pat uses the adapted joystick instead of her computer mouse to order groceries that will be delivered to her door); make one's opinion or needs known (Miriam uses a speaking device to remind the nurse that she needs her pills placed in jello to swallow); and enhance employment (Dave can now fill out insurance forms on the computer with an on-screen keyboard and a single switch at his foot).

The type of AAC tool or technique that is recommended depends on your communication needs and speaking opportunities. Here are some of the difficult situations that patients with Parkinson's disease have solved with AAC.

Communication need	What patients say	Suggested tool or technique
Talking on the telephone	"I don't use the phone at all anymore because my voice is so soft that no one understands me."	Voice amplifier (www.chattervox.com) Speech to Speech Relay Service (1-877-
Talking in the car	"When my wife is driving, she has to look at the road, not at my lips. So we can't talk anymore."	Microphone that projects through the car radio (Karaoke mike available at Toys R Us)

Talking in a group	“How do I get a word in edgewise during the family Thanksgiving dinner?!”	Attention getting device such as a bell or portable doorbell (www.homedepot.com) or single message device (www.attainmentcompany.com)
Talking during leisure activities	“No one can hear my bids anymore during our weekly card game.”	Card holder (www.sammonspreston.com) and small talking machine that speaks out bids (www.salttillo.com)
Getting needs and wants met and having daily social conversation.	“I can no longer use my voice to ask for help, or to ask how someone is doing!.”	Consider a speech generating device where messages have been pre-recorded based on your needs, and you simply press a box to speak the sentence or question. There are many communication aid manufacturers. Such as: www.attainmentcompany.com www.dynavoxtech.com www.ablenetinc.com www.words-plus.com

AAC tools also include ways to help persons write. Some ideas follow below.

Communication need	What people say	Tool or technique
Signature	I can't read my own signature anymore.	Take an old signature to a rubber stamp or stationary store and have a signature stamp made (it's legal).
Sending email	“I can no longer hit the correct keys on the keyboard.”	Have a plastic keyguard made to separate keys (www.turningpointtechnology.com)
Typing	“I can no longer type on the keyboard.”	Use an on-screen keyboard with mouse or switches. (www.cini.org)
Surfing the Net	“I can no longer move the mouse reliably.”	Consider an alternative mouse or another way to move the mouse, with your head or eyegaze. (www.keyalt.com)
Reading Books	“I can't seem to turn the pages of the book anymore.”	Try reading books on line: purchase an iPad or electronic book such as Kindle or Nook and download books

An AAC evaluation is conducted in 3 parts: an evaluation of your communication needs, your communication abilities, and your preferences for possible AAC techniques. At this time, the only AAC clinic for adults with neurological impairments is housed in the neurology department at OHSU. A number of speech-language pathologists in Oregon have learned about AAC and can guide you through the alternative communication maze. Often, the OHSU AAC Clinic works together with community speech-language pathologists to train patients and families to maximize social interaction with AAC tools. If you are interested in pursuing AAC, please contact me, Dr. Melanie Fried-Oken, at (503) 494-7587.