

Communicating with your client during COVID-19

Wearing masks makes communication with clients more difficult

- They can't read your lips.
- They can't see your facial expression.
- They may not be able to hear you as clearly.
- They may be confused or anxious when they see you in a mask.



When a person is struggling to breathe, they may have difficulty speaking as well.

Some clients may have existing communication difficulties due to, for example, dementia, stroke, Parkinson's Disease, brain injury. This will make communication for them more challenging.

Communication barriers can affect the person's ability to completely understand what you are saying or take part in decisions about their care.

What can you do to help?

- Think about things from the client's perspective.
- How are you going to support them to understand you?
- Make sure the person has their glasses and hearing aid.
- Do you need any materials, eg pen and paper?
- Make use of any charts or communication support as needed.
- Check that you are in the best position to communicate (with the light on your face, not in shadow).
- Reduce background noise as much as possible. If your client is coughing, stop and wait until they have recovered.
- Approach the client from the front and keep at eye level.
- Keep body language positive and calm.
- Show your badge with your picture and name on it.
- Speak louder if necessary – but don't shout – and give time to reply.
- If you are expressing an emotion, remember tone of voice and to say what it is as they can't see your face, eg "I feel happy to hear you are feeling better".



1. Hello, my name is

A friendly face and an understanding of who you are is key to an effective interaction. Write your name and job on your plastic gown or visor with a marker or sticker. Print a picture of yourself and attach it to your gown or apron. This will help your client to know “the person behind the mask” who is taking care of them.

Tell them who you are every time as it can be hard to know who you are behind the masks.



2. Attention

Get your client’s full attention before starting to speak. You can do this by briefly touching the shoulder or arm or making eye contact.



3. Try to establish a clear YES/NO signal

Get your client’s full attention before starting to speak. You can do this by briefly touching the shoulder or arm or making eye contact.



4. Loud and clear

Speak loudly, slowly and distinctly – like a television presenter. Say key phrases and small chunks of information at once. Check if the client needs or is wearing their hearing aid.

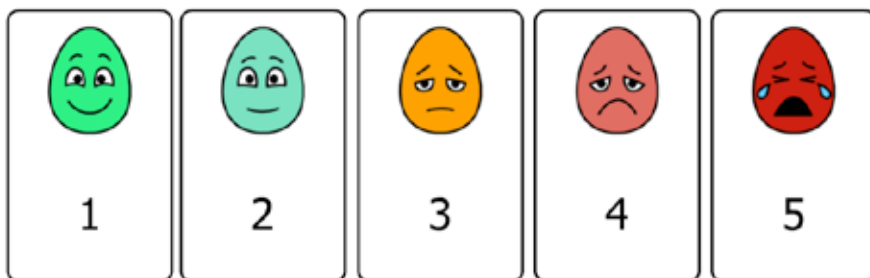
Is that OK?



5. Seek clarification

Regularly check that the client has understood you while you communicate your message.

If necessary, repeat phrases or re-phrase the sentence to assist the person to understand what you are saying. You may need to come back.



6. Use visual cards*

Point and gesture.

Write key messages if a client is struggling to hear or understand.

Encourage the client to use a communication board to rate their symptoms of pain, shortness of breath.

7. Written word

Consider providing all clients with a notepad and pen to keep at their bedside.

Encourage clients to write questions or responses if they are struggling to speak due to breathing difficulties and wearing of masks.



8. Message boards*

Message boards can allow clients to quickly identify needs or to respond to questions. This may consist of:

- Words, like oxygen, chair, mouth care.
- Phrases, like What will happen next? Please phone my family.
- Picture boards may be preferred by some clients with reduced literacy skills.

Bilingual boards are also available in a range of languages, so that clients can make their needs known in between the availability of interpreter services.

SUCTION 	WHAT'S MY STATUS? 	CALL MY FAMILY 	LIGHTS ON/OFF
TROUBLE BREATHING 	PAIN 	MEDICINE 	HOT COLD
BATHROOM 	REPOSITION 	MOUTH CARE 	LETTER BOARD
MAYBE		DON'T KNOW	LATER

9. Emotional support

Respond to all communication attempts.

Be aware that communicating can be hard work for both you and the person, so regular communication breaks may be needed. Be aware of fatigue.

Remain calm, relaxed and willing to have a conversation. Remember emotional support is essential.

Ensure you let them know you are leaving the room.



10. Time

Establishing new methods of communication can be challenging for clients and staff.

However if you take the time to establish good communication early on, then this can lead to more successful interactions, improved care and reduced frustration for everyone.

Further information and resources

There are lots of resources that you can download and laminate to help you communicate with your clients. Visit:

www.aphasiafriendly.co/covid-19-accessible-information.html

www.widgit.com/products/health/covid19-communication-chart.htm

If your client continues to have problems with their voice and communication following their recovery from COVID-19, please refer to your local Speech and Language Therapist.

Trust	Adult SLT contact number
Belfast HSCT Adult Community SLT	North & West (028) 9504 0330 South & East (028) 9504 0234
Northern HSCT Adult SLT Services	(028) 9034 1571
Western HSCT Adult SLT Services	Northern Sector (028) 7161 1428 Southern Sector (028) 6638 2547 Or via PARIS or call 028 7186 4399
Southern HSCT Adult SLT Services	(028) 3756 5744 or (028) 3756 0428
Southeastern HSCT Adult SLT Services	Ulster Hospital (028) 9055 0433 Rowan Centre Lisburn 02892 635710 EXT 81424

Based on text by the Northern Ireland Regional Speech and Language Therapists Group, May 2020.



Public Health Agency
12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

