

THE IMPACT OF AMYOTROPHIC LATERAL SCLEROSIS ON COMMUNICATION

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as ALS, is a disease of the nervous system that causes nerve cells to gradually die. When these cells die, it causes muscle weakness, and eventually the individual loses the ability to control the muscles needed to speak, move, eat, and breathe.

Before discussing how to communicate with individuals with ALS, it is important to first understand the types of communication (Merriam Webster, 2015).

Types of Communication

- ◆ Verbal Communication
 - Spoken words
- ◆ Nonverbal Communication
 - Eye contact
 - Body language
 - Tone of voice
 - Facial expressions
- ◆ Written Communication
 - Pen and paper
 - Pamphlets
 - Diagrams
 - Pictures

Tips for effectively communicating with individuals with ALS (ASHA, 2015):

- ◆ Be patient. Giving the individual a minute to think about what you said and how to answer might be necessary.
- ◆ Keep your voice at a normal volume; do not shout or yell.
- ◆ Do not interrupt; allow the other person to speak and listen carefully.

- ◆ When giving instructions, ask the individual to repeat things back to you, as well as requesting them to summarize what they were told. If they are unable to repeat it back, take another approach, such as writing out directions or demonstrating it for them.
- ◆ Open-ended questions can be difficult, so try giving the individual two options. If this is still too difficult, try asking “yes” or “no” questions.
- ◆ If the individual is unable to follow the conversation or is having trouble participating, try a different form of communicating, like thumbs up or down, or showing them pictures of what you are asking.
- ◆ If you or the other individual is becoming frustrated because they cannot express themselves, take a deep breath, giving both of you a moment in silence to help refocus.
- ◆ Most importantly, always be respectful, address the individual even if they cannot express themselves, and do not converse as if they are not there.

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