

Ageing and Communication

Ageing is a normal process that changes your abilities throughout life. Ageing changes how you communicate. Conditions such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's do not happen to everyone who is elderly. These conditions are caused by disease processes in the brain.

Changes to senses

Over time, sight and hearing change as cells in your eyes and ears wear out. As you get older, you might find it harder to read smaller print, or see finer details. You may also have more difficulty hearing. You might misunderstand someone else due to hearing sounds in a distorted way.

This is more likely for speech sounds like “t”, “s”, “k”, “f” and “ch”. You might feel like others are “mumbling”, because you may not be hearing sounds clearly (e.g. “Jeff” and “Jess” may sound the same). Possible difficulty seeing mouth and lip movements, dim lighting, and background noises such as a TV or a car engine can make conversation difficult.

Changes to speech and voice

As you age, you lose some muscle strength and flexibility. You may also have a drier mouth. Talking does not need a lot of muscle strength, so your speaking may remain clear. However, you may need more time to say longer or more complex words.

Your voice can be affected by factors such as hormones, emotions, yelling, breathing ability, and diseases. As you get older, this can also change how you sound. Your voice might become higher or lower, sound quieter, be more breathy, creaky or husky, and may also have a tremulous/unsteady quality.

Changes to language

Difficulty hearing can make it hard to understand what people are saying.

You might also feel like you have difficulty recalling some words and find this frustrating. This may not be related to a decline in intelligence, thinking, or memory.

Topics of conversation may also change as you get older. You might find it easier to talk about things that happened a long time ago, or about what you are doing now (e.g. grandchildren, medical appointments etc.). It can be hard to keep up with “slang” terms that can change very quickly or be specific to a group of people (e.g. fans of newer movies/shows/books). Some people may not be familiar with words or phrases that were common when you were younger.

Changes to thinking

Communication can take longer and require more effort as you age. You might have difficulty remembering recent information and events, names, or what others have said. As a result, it might take longer to complete a sentence or tell a story.

Social isolation

There are many things that can make it hard to interact with others. You may have recently lost friends, loved ones or a long-term partner or Physical changes might make it difficult for you to go out into the community. This can reduce opportunities to catch up with other people.

"Social media and technology can help us stay in touch with friends and family when we can't meet in person. However, technology is often changing which might feel daunting, or confusing. Reaching out to friends, family, and support services like your local library, can help with setting up and learning communication technologies. With practice, technology can become a great way to stay connected and reduce social isolation at home."

Sometimes other people can make communication more difficult (e.g. it can be a challenge trying to talk to someone who is in a hurry or distracted by their phone).

Communication strategies

There are things you can do to make communication easier and more enjoyable.

For example, you can:

- Arrange to catch up with people at times and in situations that suit you. Morning tea at home might suit you better than dinner in a noisy and dimly lit restaurant.
- Wear glasses and hearing aids if you have them. If these aren't helping, have them reviewed.
- Let people know if you can't hear them.
- Tell people what they can do to make conversation easier. This might include facing you when they talk, turning off the TV, speaking more clearly etc.

Your friends and family can help you by:

- getting your attention before they start talking
- facing you when they talk to you
- choosing quiet and well-lit places to talk
- speaking clearly
- keeping in touch in ways that suit you.

Working with a speech pathologist

If you find communication is becoming difficult a speech pathologist can help you find the best strategies for you. They will work you and your family and friends to find the best ways of communicating. You may also want to see an audiologist to have your hearing checked.