FACILITATING GOOD COMMUNICATION IN TELEREHABILITATION

Clients with communication issues

People with communication difficulties have particular communication needs that need to be considered when doing telerehabilitation.

People with aphasia may have difficulty understanding written/verbal language and/or expressing themselves through writing and/or oral language.

Before the session:

- Ensure that all information about telerehabilitation is presented in an accessible format[1].
- It may be useful to develop a package of supported conversation tools (e.g. maps, rating scales, pictures etc) and send these to each client.
- You may like to send some assessment or therapy materials in advance (by mail or email if they are able to print material) so that the client and their family: (a) have an opportunity to review these before the session, and/or (b) can have the materials present to support the therapy session.

Within the session:

- Getting the set up right is invaluable. Start simply. Don't try using more advanced features until everyone is comfortable. Family members or support people can help in this. You may spend quite a bit of time in initial sessions getting the set up right. This can be a time when you feel like little therapy is happening, but you can do a lot of assessment observing how the client is communicating, including following instructions.
- Remember the set up is not just about technology, but about establishing the relationship with the client (and support people if present). People with aphasia value the social contact aspect of therapy sessions. Having a bit of time and space for "small talk" during a telehealth session is often appreciated.
- Be aware of the communication strategies that the person may need to support their understanding and ability to express themselves. These strategies include gesture, writing key words, and using diagrams. Plan for how you can incorporate these into your rehabilitation. Liaise with your speech-language therapist for support. Low technology supports are invaluable. These may include:

---

[1] https://www.stroke.org.uk/sites/default/files/accessible_information_guidelines.pdf1_.pdf

- Make sure your upper body and arms are easily visible to the client so that they can see your gestures. Make sure they are positioned so you can see their upper body and arms as well.
- Have a whiteboard close so you can write key words and show these to the client. Use a thick black pen rather than a fine ballpoint pen Before the session, ask the client to make sure they have pen and paper available. Remember that you will need to invert the screen settings so that writing doesn't appear back to front!
- When holding things up to show the client, remember to show these to the camera, not the screen.
- Some telerehabilitation platforms allow you to write while talking (e.g. the whiteboard function on Zoom). Be mindful that this may make your face smaller and clients may prefer the low tech pen and paper approach. Always check how things are working for the client.
- It may be helpful to do a visual schedule of the session to help orient the client to what is going to happen.
- Monitor the speed of your speech.
- Allow time for people to process what you say. If using predesigned activities or electronic resources, be aware that they may not be set up for people with aphasia who may need more time than is allowed.
- Make sure your face is easily visible. People often need to be able to clearly see your face and lips.
- Be mindful of how different functions within the telerehabilitation platform may impact on how clients see and engage with you. While screenshare may allow you to share therapy resources, it can be problematic for people who need to be able to see your face and gestures clearly, or who have attentional issues.
- You can show videos via screenshare functions to demonstrate key strategies (e.g. videos demonstrating specific communication strategies) which might be helpful for supporting communication partners. You can also use videos as prompts for communication activities.
- If there is a communication breakdown, take a moment to reflect on why it happened and consider what might help make communication successful. Your team's speech-language therapist is a valuable resource to support you and the client.
- Explicitly monitor for fatigue, asking the client about this. Be mindful that sessions may need to be shorter as they may be more fatiguing, especially if the person isn't used to video interactions.

People with apraxia of speech or dysarthria. Some people may have reduced intelligibility due to apraxia of speech or dysarthria. With these clients, the environment can impact on how successful communication is. This includes things like background noise and quality of the internet connection. Fatigue may also impact on people's ability to use strategies to enhance their intelligibility. Clients may also be concerned about who can overhear the session and may further modify their speech to try and maintain privacy. A quiet private

environment may make it easier for both parties; high quality headphones may help the clinician hear and understand their speech.