

# Communication 101:

## MS and cognitive-communication disorders

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**R**esearch investigating motor and sensory disorders in individuals with MS is immense, while cognitive-communication deficits associated with MS have received little attention. The lack of research in communication disorders and MS is shocking because nearly 45% to 65% of individuals living with MS experience problems with memory, attention, distractibility, problem-solving, word-finding and other cognitive functions as a symptom of the disease (Rao, Leo, Bernardin, and Unverzagt, 1991). These cognitive and communication changes vary considerably. Understanding the different types of cognitive and communication difficulties is the first step towards managing these symptoms effectively.

### Word Finding

Aphasia, or the loss of words, until recently was not considered a clinical manifestation of MS because MS primarily affects the white matter of the brain and spinal cord and aphasia is typically associated with diseases of gray matter. However, a recent multi-center study investigating the prevalence of aphasia in MS found nearly 40% of individuals demonstrated markedly reduced word-finding skills. Aphasic disorders may be observed in two different situations in MS. The most common situation is difficulty generating the names of person, places and things over the disease's course and the second is acute aphasia during or following an exacerbation.

**Tip:** Give yourself a hint. Two types of useful cues to improve word finding skills are phonemic cues (generating the first letter of the missing word) and semantic cues (thinking of the category the word belongs in such as foods, places, things in the kitchen, etc.).

### Memory

Memory is a complex process that is localized in different structures in the brain. Memory deficits are due to ineffective encoding of information, inadequate storage of information, difficulty retrieving information, and the inability to suppress environmental distractions (background noise, competing talkers, etc.). Individuals living with MS may experience difficulty with episodic memory (memory concerning temporarily dated events), procedural memory (memory for how to do things) and semantic memory (memory for words and things).

**Tip:** Consistently use a calendar or daily planner to keep appointments and events organized. Minimize the amount of information you need to remember. Instead write it down in one central location.

### Fatigue

Similar to the fatigue many individuals living with MS experience, cognitive fatigue may also be present. Research shows that MS patients can become fatigued easily when engaging in mentally challenging work. Once feeling fatigued, individuals with MS have a tendency to make errors in their written and verbal communication.

**Tip:** Breakdown larger projects and tasks into smaller, more manageable projects. Be sure to space these tasks apart and take frequent breaks.

### Get Guidance!

If you have questions about communication and MS, please contact Marissa Barrera at 646-230-9292 or [MBarrera@naftalicenter.com](mailto:MBarrera@naftalicenter.com).