

TIPS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

When the muscles of the larynx, throat (pharynx), palate, tongue and/or lips weaken, people who suffer from ALS could get problems speaking. Some of these problems are:

- Hoarser voice
- More muted or more nasal voice
- Unclear speech

Speech therapists can be a big help to people who suffer from these communication problems. Speech therapists try to maintain the communication skills as long as possible using all kinds of techniques and tips. On top of that they can also evaluate the swallowing function and, if necessary, give tips to improve swallowing.

A few tips:

- Choose an environment with the least possible noise. After all it can be very tiring to talk over a television or radio.
- Talk slowly.
- Look at your communication partner when you talk to him/her and make sure he/she can see your face clearly as well. A well-lit room makes personal communication easier.
- Use short sentences. Speak only one or two words or syllables with each breath.
- Over-articulate: make the vowels longer and exaggerate the consonants.
- Choose a comfortable position when you're talking.
- Be careful with exercises which usually strengthen the speech muscles, they can have the opposite effect on people who suffer from ALS. Always ask a speech therapist which exercises are good for you.
- Take a (vocal) pause before you have a conversation or make a phone call. Fatigue has a great influence on your speech ability. It can be the case that communication goes much smoother in the morning than in the evening.
- When your voice sounds very soft, it can be interesting to use a voice amplifier.

When someone has difficulty understanding you the following strategies may help:

- If you can still write, make sure to always have a notepad and a pen nearby as backup. In case your communication partner doesn't understand you, you can still write down what you want to say.
- If writing isn't possible anymore, use an alphabet board (board with letters of the alphabet, best organized according to letter frequency) so you can point at the first letter of the spoken word, have it pointed at for you or scanned (in case of an electronic board).
- Spell the words, if you wish with the assistance from an alphabet board.
- Use telegraphic speech, use only the words that are essential to communicate that certain message.

Non-verbal communication:

Non-verbal communication means communication without words. When it becomes too difficult to communicate with speech it's best to make use of certain expressions and/or movements to communicate the message. You can for example make use of the movements of the eyes and eyelids to communicate "yes" or "no". Non-verbal communication can even improve the speech because it eases off the pressure to talk. On top of that the possibility of non-verbal communication also lessens the frustration and stress that arises when one is unable to express oneself, which causes the person with speech problems to communicate in a more relaxed way.

Tools:

Don't hesitate to contact the ALS-League when it comes to tools that improve communication. We have a large amount of tools available (see last pages of newsletter) of which some can be used with minimal movement or pressurization.

Tips for communication partners:

- Look at the person with communication problems when you talk to him/her.
- Ask questions which can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no".
- Repeat the part of the sentence you understood (e.g. You want me to go upstairs and go get what exactly for you?).

Translation: **Sara De Roy**