

SENIOR FITNESS

Asking About Aphasia

By

Jim Evans

DEAR JIM: My husband suffered a serious stroke last year and is unable to speak. He has some physical issues too, but his inability to speak has impacted our lives drastically. He CAN speak – it’s just that he is very difficult to understand. It takes him so long to communicate what he wants to say that most people become extremely uncomfortable around him and can’t wait to get away. They are always very polite because they don’t want to hurt his feelings, but I can tell it makes him frustrated and angry when they leave before he has been able to say what he intended to say to them. I don’t blame them because I find it difficult to understand him most of the time too, but what can I do to help him get better and how can encourage our friends not to abandon us? **LONELY IN LUBBOCK**

DEAR LONELY: For the benefit of our readers, your husband has a condition known as aphasia – pronounced uh-fay’-zhuh – which refers to “an impairment of the ability to use or comprehend words, usually acquired as a result of a stroke or other brain injury” according to the National Aphasia Association (NAA).

In 1998, just months after his retirement, my friend Rear Admiral Don Campbell suffered a hemiplegia stroke (affecting the right hemisphere of the brain) and was paralyzed on his right side. He also experienced severe aphasia and could no longer speak without great difficulty. Don had been the highest-ranking legal officer in the Navy with hundreds of military attorneys under his wing and politicians and military leaders from all over the world among his friends, but suddenly he found himself unable to speak the simplest sentence without sounding as though he had marbles in his mouth – a frustrating and humiliating experience for a proud man.

Don had always been physically active and returned to a vigorous exercise regimen as soon as he was able by walking along the waterfront near his home, swinging his affected right leg from the hip in short exaggerated steps, and swimming (try swimming with one arm) at his local health club to retrain his atrophied muscles and regain his physical independence.

Don has also had to engage in extensive speech therapy exercises involving

reading, writing, following directions, and repeating what he hears. He had to learn to deal with the anger and frustration of his disability by speaking more slowly and learning to have patience with others. He realizes that the words that come out of his mouth do not always sound the same as what he means to say.

Harder to deal with, perhaps, are the feelings of loneliness and despair that it caused for him and his family. “You don’t really lose your friends,” says Don’s wife Judy. “They just stop coming around anymore. They don’t feel comfortable trying to understand what Don is trying to say, and he becomes frustrated because they don’t understand. The circle of friends that you count on for social interaction – your sanity – becomes smaller and smaller.”

What can you do? Keep your husband fully engaged in his physical therapy and his speech therapy and look into local stroke clubs or support groups that can help you both learn how to adjust to the life changes that accompany stroke and aphasia. You might even consider inviting some of your friends to attend a support group meeting with you so that they can better understand what you and your husband are experiencing and how important their support and continued friendship is to both of you.

Take time for yourself, too, so that you do not become a prisoner to his disabilities from a false sense of responsibility that you have to always be there for him. Re-establishing independence – yours and his – is an important part of the recovery process. Besides, somebody needs to take care of the caretaker too, and that means YOU.

I encourage you to contact the American Stroke Association at 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or refer to their website at www.strokeassociation.org to order a free one-year subscription to *Stroke Connection* Magazine which will provide you with a wealth of information and personal stories that will inspire and fortify both of you in facing your challenges together.

Jim Evans is a 38-year veteran of the health and fitness industry and a nationally recognized fitness consultant. He is also chairman of the Advisory Council for the Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) of San Diego County and host of the popular radio talk show “Forever Young” on San Diego’s KCBQ 1170 AM (www.fyradio.biz) focusing on issues of health, fitness, and quality of life.

