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Video 3: Communication tools

Professor Baroness Sheila Hollins

One of the reasonable adjustments that doctors need to make when communicating with a patient, a person with a learning disability, is to adjust their communication style so as to make sure that the person themselves really understands what they’re saying. And by adjusting your communication style and the tools that you use, then it’s more likely that you’ll be able to check that the person has understood what you’ve said as well.

Supporter

Did they communicate with you good?

Geraldine McCluskey

Talking Mats is one method – a low tech method – of communication that can be used with people with learning disabilities. It’s really good because it is easy to use, although it does probably require some degree of training and education in its use.

It uses picture symbols and a mat, and what it helps is to focus the person with the learning disability’s attention to whatever the topic or the decision in hand might be. And with the use of the pictures it facilitates that person to make a decision as to whether they are happy or they do want or like something, whether they are unhappy or don’t want to do something, or whether they are not sure.
(Geraldine McCluskey) What I would say is that it's not a tool that would be used with everyone. The person would have to have a certain level of spoken understanding - usually around two to three key words - and the health passport or any information that would be provided to a doctor would hopefully indicate if that would be then a suitable mode of communication for the person that they would maybe be interviewing.

Supporter Yeah. Is it good communicate - when they talk to you, do they talk to you nicely, or badly, or alright? Are you looking at this one? It's good.

Jim Blair I think health action plans and passports are very, very helpful. Certainly the hospital passport has saved people's lives

Catherine Fields When we start looking at the hospital passport, what I do is sit down one to one with the service user and we look at the reasons why they've been in hospital and their health needs. We often work in conjunction with the community learning disabilities team who put together the health action plan. And we draw on the main points that people need to know about a service user - medication, what is essential medication and the times that they need to be taken, because it's so important when you go into hospital, and the hospital take over the dispensing of medication, that there is good communication to avoid people getting double doses or not having their medication at all. And also so the service user knows that they can rely on whoever is supporting them to give them what they need, what is right for them.

Catherine (to Carol) This passport sits on your bed, doesn’t it. And it’s there for you to look at and to show people. It says here all sorts of things, like what you like to eat...

Carol Yes

Catherine Fields ...and how you like to take your tea.

Carol Mm

Catherine Fields And also, [laughs] look!
Catherine Fields (to Carol) This is about your cat, isn't it, yeah, and that you like people to talk to you about him.

Catherine Fields Another part of the hospital passport is very much around someone’s communication needs. People with learning disabilities have massively varying needs, and what can be very difficult needs to address in an environment where someone can be scared or feeling helpless.

One of the most important things is that doctors and nurses and any support staff spend time sitting down with someone and going through their hospital passport to find out what is this person’s main means of communication and what extra resources they might need to put in place to make sure that they are able to get the best out of the person being in hospital. So if they need to have some pictures there, or if they need a board that the person can draw on or write on, then it’s really important that those things are noted down and put in place, and also passed on to the rest of the team who are going to be supporting the client in hospital.

Dr Matt Hoghton You can do a limited amount of intensive interaction without having to be an expert on it. And whilst if you are clear what you are trying to do, which is just trying to use the sounds that they are using - not mimicking them, but just trying to copy them and then perhaps vary them, to see if the person understands what you are saying - you may get an interesting interaction; you may end up being able to actually interact much more fully than you realise you can. It will probably be non-verbal, it will be in touch and in using sounds or rhythms, but that will allow you to actually gain more confidence with the person with learning disabilities.

And once you’ve made that connection with a person with learning disabilities it will alter the way you feel about that person with learning disabilities. It’s same when you get a smile back from a person with learning disabilities. As soon as you’ve made that connection, you will change your attitude and you will do what it takes to ensure that person has the best care.