



Be Pain Smart – My Role

Communicating better

Communicating after a brain injury and with chronic pain can be difficult. If you want to have an important conversation, it can help to plan exactly what you want to say and write down your key points.

After a brain injury, it can become hard to communicate what you are thinking, feeling, and living through. When you have chronic pain, you might also find it hard to talk about your pain and its effect on your life. Sharing what you are going through can help you to manage your pain by feeling more connected and understood by others.

If you have significant problems communicating with those around you, it can be helpful to work with an experienced speech therapist who can help you to re-learn how to talk and communicate, and refresh your social and conversation skills.

There are two main parts to communicating well with others.

1. You need to send a clear message.
2. The other person needs to hear and understand it.

This sounds simple, but you use complex skills that you learn over time and need to keep practising. Problems can arise when these two parts do not match up together, such as the message sent was unclear or misunderstood by the other person. So be clear about what you want to say, but also think about what you are wanting to hear in return.

Giving a simple and clear message can be hard after you have a brain injury because you might forget some key ideas, go off topic or get confused. If you want to have an important conversation, it can help to think about what exactly you want to say and write down your key points. To try this out, read the example below and then give it a go yourself.



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My plan to communicate better

Give it a try – imagine your pain has got worse and you are going to see your doctor. Think about what you would say to the doctor.

This week my pain has gotten worse.

Now think about what you would like to hear back from the doctor.

I want the doctor to tell me that my pain is not going to get worse. I want to hear that this is not a new injury. That it is just a flare-up and will get better in a few days.



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Unfortunately, you cannot control how others hear and understand your message, but you can be clear about what you are trying to get out of the conversation. Most of the time you are looking for at least one of these five things:

1. **Understanding** – to feel heard
2. **Reassurance** – to feel comfort
3. **Give information** – to tell others something important or share your experience
4. **Action** – for them to do something
5. **Advice** – to get guidance.

Read over what you wanted to hear from the doctor. Was it a clear message? Which of the five points were you looking for? Write it down below.

Reassurance

Have a look at what you were originally going to say to the doctor; does it match up? Was it clear what you wanted to hear? Have another try at writing your message to the doctor.

This week my pain has gotten worse. I would like you to check to see if it is new or just a flare-up. I am getting worried about this, so I would like some reassurance that my pain is not getting worse.

You can see that if you are expecting a certain response, but the other person thinks you want something else, that this can lead to frustration. It is important to try to make your statements as clear as you can to stop confusion.



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Read about Alice's conversation with her husband and see how this communication breakdown happened.

Alice was telling her husband about how she was struggling to go for a walk for more than 20 minutes. She told him that she and her physiotherapist had come up with a pacing plan but she was finding it difficult to stick to it every day. Her husband, James, thought she was looking for advice, so he told her that she should stop the pacing plan and just do what she could each day without making her pain worse and that if her pain got bad, she should stop walking. Hearing this, Alice became angry because she felt James was not supporting her to manage her pain.

Alice was looking for understanding and reassurance, she wanted James to know that she was struggling with her walking and to reassure her that if she stuck to her pacing plan it would get easier.

What could Alice have said to make this clear? Alice could have started the conversation by saying, 'James, do you have time to talk? I am finding it hard to stick to my pacing plan. It would be good if you could listen to me and encourage me to keep going'.

Starting off like this would let James know what she was wanting to get out of the chat and reduce conflict and misunderstanding.

My plan for communicating better

Now it is your chance to have a turn. Imagine your pain has gotten worse and you are going to see your doctor. Think about what you would normally say to the doctor.



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Now, think about what you would like to hear back from the doctor.

Read over what you wanted to hear from the doctor. Which of these five points were you looking for?

1. **Understanding** – to feel heard
2. **Reassurance** – to feel comfort
3. **Give information** – to tell others something important or share your experience
4. **Action** – for them to do something
5. **Advice** – to get guidance.

Write it down below.



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Now look back at what you were originally going to say to the doctor; does it match up? Was it clear what you wanted to hear? Have another try at writing your message to the doctor.

It is easy to see how misunderstandings can happen, so give this tool a go the next time you need to have an important conversation. Be patient with this, it might take a few tries to get the hang of it.