A fact sheet about

Communicating beyond speech

Understanding Zoe

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Understanding Zoe

Communicating beyond speech

What AAC is, why every way counts, and how to get one ready.



Key points

- Ways to communicate other than speech are called AAC (definition below).
- Typing, writing, signing, pictures, letter boards, gestures and apps are each as valid as speech.
- AAC is for anyone who needs it: people who never speak, people whose speech comes and goes, and people who speak most of the time.
- It may help to set up one way before you need it, and to show the people around you how to use it with you.

What AAC is, and who it is for

You may use a letter board or an app to communicate every day. Then a new support worker asks you questions out loud and waits for spoken answers. Or you speak on most days, but at the chemist your speech goes and you need another way, fast.

Many adults get their message across well without speech.

AAC means any way to communicate besides speech, or alongside it. Augmentative means adding to speech, and alternative means in place of it. Some ways need nothing in your hands: signing, gestures, pointing, nodding, your face and sounds. Others use something you can hold:

- pen and paper, or a small whiteboard
- typing on your phone, or texting someone in the same room
- a letter board, where you point to letters to spell words
- pictures, symbols or written choices you can point to
- an app or a device that says aloud the words you type or choose

Some people think AAC is only for people who never speak. Autistic AAC users say this belief stops others from trying it. Plenty of adults who usually speak use it too, for the times speech goes or costs too much. Research suggests using AAC does not get in the way of speech.

Why every way of communicating counts

The point is to get your message across, in whatever way works for you. People who speak easily often choose a text over a phone call, and AAC users have the same right to choose.

Speech can work and still cost a lot. Some neurodivergent adults who speak some of the time, pushed themself to speak for years, at a high cost to their energy. Once they used several kinds of AAC, it took less effort, and they had more energy for what they cared about.

More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: have one way to communicate without speech ready before you need it

Choose one way to communicate that needs no speech, and get it ready on a calm day. It is much harder to set up once speech is hard. Pick what suits you:

- a few lines saved on your phone or on a card in your wallet, like "I can't speak right now. I can type. Please wait."
- an app that says aloud what you type
- written or picture choices for daily needs, like yes, no, wait, help and a break
- a few signs or gestures agreed with the people you live with

Then show one person close to you how it works. You can save your lines in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app, so they are on your phone when you need them. You can also fill in About me in your Understanding Zoe profile with your strengths, your support needs and how you communicate best, ready to share at your next appointment.

If you do not speak, or rarely do, you may already have a system. Then it may help to check that it lets you share more than requests: how you feel, what you think, and no. Some days a way that worked before will not, which is why lots of people keep more than one.

This step comes from what neurodivergent adults who use AAC say has helped them. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. And lived experience is valid too.

If someone supports you to communicate

A support person, a family member or a friend can help AAC work well. You can ask them to:

- learn your way and use it with you, not only expect you to use it
- give you time to answer
- offer written or picture choices, or yes or no questions, on hard days
- talk to you, not about you, and ask staff to do the same

In health care, neurodivergent adults said visits went better when support people helped in the way they wanted. Some felt shut out when staff spoke to the support person instead of them. In one study, neurodivergent adults made a short report for their doctor of what helps them, including how they communicate. Some made it with a support person, and almost all found it easy and useful.

In Understanding Zoe, you can type or talk to make notes of what helps you, including how you communicate, so they are ready before a visit. You choose who can see them, so a support person or doctor knows how you want to be helped.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether speech is hard every day or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you find AAC that suits you, and help the people around you learn it, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you.

You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

You can read more about why you may lose speech when you are stressed here.

Sources

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Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

for more information, you can contact

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