For Parkinson’s Patients, Working Towards a “New Normal”

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By Our Experts

Picking up the phone to catch up with an old friend. Eating a special holiday meal with the whole family. Telling “Alexa” to turn the lights off. These are activities are so common we start to take them for granted. However, for many of us, injuries and chronic illnesses can cause us to develop communication disorders, meaning the ability to do things like hear, speak, swallow and even eat become difficult or impossible. Beyond the physical discomfort, it can also impair an individual’s ability to stay independent. This year, as we reflect on National Speech-Language-Hearing Month, it is a valuable time to look at the ways we can address the prevalence of communication disorders, which impact 5-10% of the population.

Working as a speech-language pathologist with home and community health nonprofit VNS Health, I work daily across Queens with patients in their home to help them address communication disorders. One disease I often see in my patients across the borough is Parkinson’s. A disease that is still woefully under-researched, Parkinson’s impacts nearly 1 million Americans. For those who have received a recent Parkinson’s diagnosis, or have a loved one with the disease, here are some ways speech language pathologists can work with our patients to address common challenges.

Nothing Wrong With Needing Help!

As a degenerative disease, Parkinson’s might start with only a few symptoms, but will progress over
time. Sometimes these changes make some people feel embarrassed, ashamed, or worried that they will lose their independence. Needing help isn’t a sign of weakness

though, but rather a commitment to keeping yourself healthy. Speech-language pathologists, alongside our care teams made up of nurses, home health aides, doctors, social workers, and rehab specialists are there right beside you every step of the way. Best of all, we are always ready to help cheer you on when it gets tough!

Speaking Up and Getting Creative

Speaking is such an important part of our identity and sense of well-being, and we all rely on our voice to advocate for ourselves. Many Parkinson's patients may find that over time that their speech has changed be that slurred speech, speaking in a monotone, speaking more softly or quickly, or at a lower pitch. Losing the ability to comfortably speak is an especially challenging aspect of this disease. This is where Speech-Language Pathologists play an especially important role. Beyond exercises and techniques to help maintain or slow down changes, there are also assistive devices that can help bridge communication gaps. In addition, I often work with my Parkinson's patients find ways to conserve energy and use nonverbal communication as an alternative so you can still speak your mind and share your feelings

A "New Normal"

Losing the ability to do something we used to do easily, like eating or taking a sip of a drink can be very jarring for some of my patients. I remind them that while the approaches we work on together might not feel natural at first, they will eventually become your "new normal." We work together to develop an individualized swallowing program and make adaptations so they can still accomplish daily activities like eating and drinking.

Physical Health and Mental Health Go Hand in Hand

Beyond the physical impact, communication disorders can also take a toll on one's mental health. Some patients feel frustration as communication becomes more difficult and they may lose interest in activities they once enjoyed. Part of my job is closely listening to those concerns from my patients and helping develop strategies to reduce frustration. However, if a patient starts experiencing more serious mental health issues like anxiety or depression, our team will work together to connect someone with mental health resources. Parkinson's is a challenging disease, but I am continuously in awe of the strength and perseverance I see in those battling this illness. It's a disease that requires everyone, from the patient, to clinicians, to friends and family, to be flexible. And that isn't an always an easy ask!

However, with the support of rehabilitation therapists and clinicians, it is possible to live a life where you stay safe, comfortable and happy at home.

Our Rehabilitation therapists can help you or your loved one regain the strength and mobility needed to achieve recovery goals, whether that's running a marathon or doing everyday tasks like buttoning a shirt.

Rehabilitation Therapy Services

Source: https://www.vnshealth.org/about/newsroom/articles/for-parkinsons-patients-working-towards-a-new-normal/

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