

Complex Communication Challenges: Adjusting Your Communication Style

One of the most important actions you can take to ensure effective communication with a person who has complex communication needs is to adjust your style/approach to communication to suit theirs.

The person may use some form of electronic device such as a phone or tablet. They may use a communication board, an eye gaze chart, or they may communicate by text or use Auslan. So, the first step you need to take is to inform yourself about the person and how they communicate.

You should be aware of the need to allow time for the person to provide their responses, and always check in with them that you have understood what they mean.

You might ask the person and or their support person/s for information, including whether there are any resources or tools already in place, that could assist you and whether the person is happy to share them with you. Always put the person first when communicating with them. If you need assistance from a support person or interpreter, ask the person first, then address their support person or interpreter. Explain to the person what steps you are going to take to facilitate communicating with them directly.

6 Top Tips

1

Take time to get to know the person.



2

Look at and talk to the person primarily and not their support person.

3

Slowdown and pay attention!





Do you mean...?

4
Ask questions if you're unsure, to check you have understood.

Do you need more time?



5
What is the person's behaviour telling you? Check their plan if they are happy to share it with you.



6
Relax and give it a go, we all make mistakes.

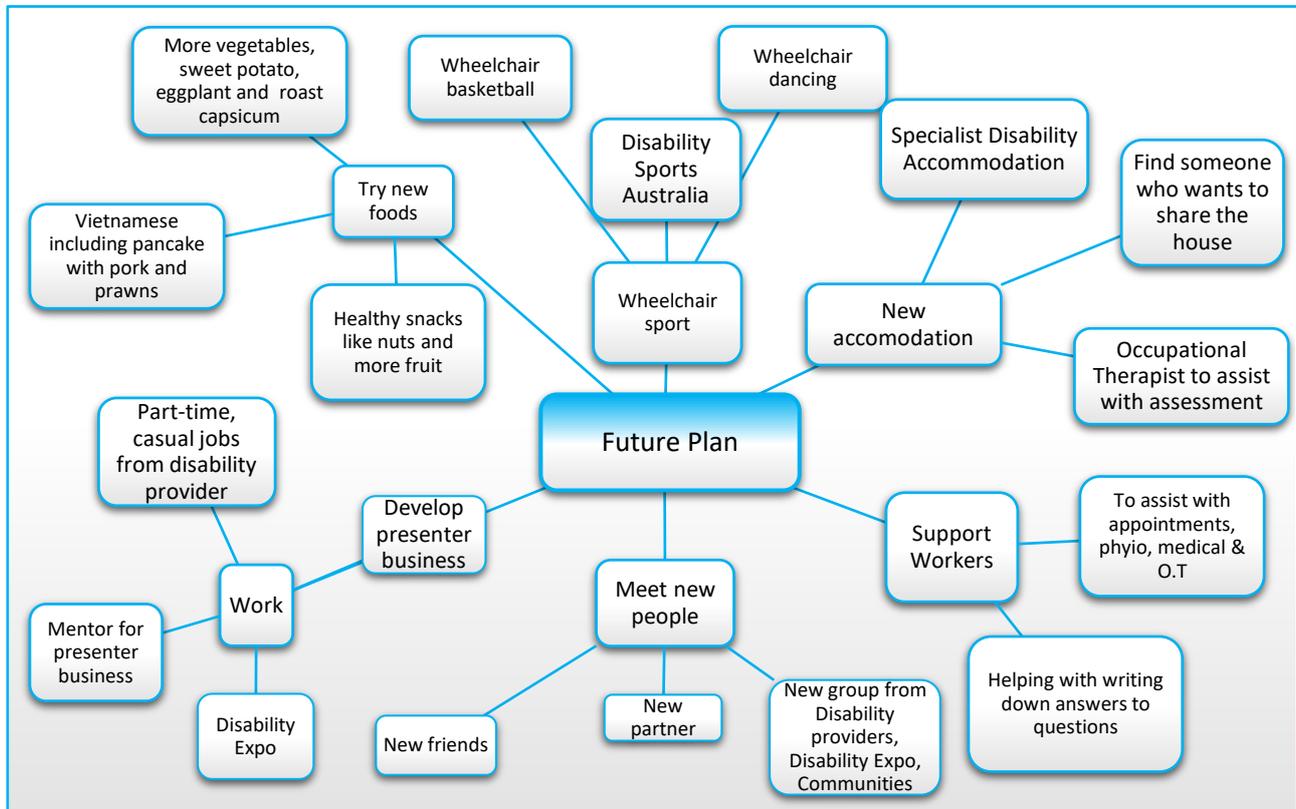
Resources that assist communication:

There are a number of resources that may already be in place to assist with getting to know the person and with understanding how to communicate with them. Make sure you ask the person and/or their support person/organisation whether it is okay for those resources to be shared with you. These resources could include: mind maps, a health plan, a communication plan/a personal communication dictionary, communication boards, a behaviour plan/behaviour information.

Mind Mapping-getting to know the person

A mind map is a tool/planning process that provides information about a person. This may include the person's goals and what is needed to help achieve them, their likes and dislikes, what is important to them in life, as well as the people who are important to them.

A mind map is often contributed to by people who are close to the person; one of its purposes is to provide information that allows others to get to know the person well. A person may have different mind maps to reflect different aspects of their lives, for example mind maps of: future plans; a work plan; a food plan; a fitness plan; holidays/travel plan; a well-being/health plan, an NDIS mind map or a mind map of who the person is.



EXAMPLE OF A FUTURE PLAN MIND MAP

For more information, including examples and a workbook, see *Mapping Needs* (12 December 2018, Disability Services, Department of Communities, WA):

<https://www.disability.wa.gov.au/Global/Publications/NDIS/ILC/Resources/Resources/Project%20Resource%20-%20MAPPING%20NEEDS%202012-Dec-2018.pdf>

* Laurel House would like to thank Quang Nguyen (Disability Rights Advocate) for advising of the important role that mind maps can play for people with complex communication needs and for sharing his experience.

Health plan/folder

A health plan or health folder may contain information about a person's health, communication, behaviour, the important people in their life, as well as tools to assist with communication between the person and healthcare providers.



An excellent example of this type of resource is the *My Health Matters Folder* (Council for Intellectual Disability, NSW) which was co-designed by people with disability and GPs.

<https://cid.org.au/resource/my-health-matters-folder/>

Personal communication dictionary

A personal communication dictionary may include information on how a person communicates, such as their vocabulary, use of gestures, facial expressions and vocalisations, their behaviour and advice on how to respond as a communication partner.

For further information on personal communication dictionaries see Scope:

<https://www.scopeaust.org.au/information-resources-hub/resources-download/>

Making your organisation Communication Accessible

For information about how to make your organisation an inclusive environment for people with complex communication needs, including short video's, see Scope:

<https://www.scopeaust.org.au/services-for-organisations/access-and-inclusion-for-businesses/communication-access/>



Deaf Connect provides accredited Auslan community courses and Deaf Awareness Training (DAT) online:

<https://deafconnect.org.au/education>

Expression Australia provides online and face to face courses in DAT and Auslan:

<https://www.expression.com.au/services/auslan>

<https://www.expression.com.au/services/expression-australia-hobart>

<https://www.expression.com.au/services/expression-australia-launceston>