

Communication: The Missing Accessibility Symbol

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Living with cerebral palsy for nearly forty-nine years and all that that entails on a daily basis, I am still puzzled by society's obsession with the ability to walk. That not being able to move about upright on one's own two feet makes you less of a person, less worthy or valuable. And it is something that needs fixing or curing.

But I find the inability to clearly communicate verbally is far more disabling. For some reason, which continues to baffle me, the majority of our society links the ability to speak with the ability to hear and to understand. When many people encounter someone who has trouble speaking they seem to assume that I - a university graduate and a published author - do not understand, and they automatically begin talking louder and slower, even use hand gestures as if an impromptu game of Charades has broken out.

I am not alone. Research assistant Krystine Donato says, "My greatest barriers are people who think that because I can't speak, I cannot understand what they are saying or I am incapable of making my own decisions. People need to know that we are all different. Having a speech disability does not necessarily mean that we can't hear and understand."

Regardless of our talents, skills and abilities, not being able to speak clearly causes us much frustration, misunderstanding and isolation. We face barriers every day. For

example, people often ignore us and talk to a person with us; shout at us; underestimate our ability to make their own decisions; and do not ask us what they can do to make communication go smoothly.

This means each daily interaction people have with others, without even thinking about it, becomes an ordeal for us. Little things like making a hair appointment, ordering an iced mocha latte with skim milk or talking with one's doctor in private becomes futile, if not impossible. It means missed opportunities when it comes to socializing, making friends, and finding jobs. This negatively impacts one's self-esteem and self-confidence, leading to further social isolation.

In other situations, communication barriers can be dangerous and potentially life-threatening. As educator, Nola Millan explains, "We can experience serious barriers communicating with health care professionals, police, emergency and legal services. These are critical communication situations. Unlike people who are Deaf, we have no trained communication assistant services to support us communicating in these situations."

As an example, an individual with a communication disability attempted to tell police how she was abused. The police responded that she would not be a credible witness because she could not speak. In another situation, a young man did not have food when in hospital, because "the staff dropped off the tray at the end of my bed and left. They didn't give me the chance to tell them I needed someone to help me eat my meal."

As a well-informed individual with a physical disability, I always felt confident in requesting what I needed for physical accessibility. For example, I knew that buildings should have ramps and accessible washrooms. However, when it came to my speech disability, I never knew what to ask for in terms of communication accessibility.

In 20..... I started to work with Communication Disabilities Access Canada (CDAC), a Canadian, non-profit organization that promotes social justice and accessibility for people who have disabilities that affect their communication. I learned that I am not alone. There are over 440,000 Canadians who have significant communication disabilities, and who are not Deaf. They may have cerebral palsy, autism, a cognitive disability, an acquired brain injury, aphasia after a stroke, dementia, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (or ALS), Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis or other conditions that affect how they communicate.

We may communicate using body language, pointing at letter boards or typing on communication devices. Those of us who cannot spell, use pictures or symbols. Those of us who cannot point to items, use switches to operate our devices.

Just like everyone else, we have a legal right to full and equal access to goods and services and in Canada, our rights are protected by accessibility and human rights legislation.

So how come, our accessibility needs are not well known and more troubling, frequently omitted in accessibility legislation and guidelines.

The communication access symbol was developed in 2016 by CDAC. It tells people that communication is a two-way interaction between people and is about giving as well as receiving information. Many organizations across Canada are displaying the symbol to tell people that they welcome people who have disabilities that affect their communication and that they will make every effort to accommodate their needs. For example, they will:



- Talk directly to us, not to a person who might be with us.
- Not underestimate our abilities to make decisions
- Watch and listen as we may use speech, body language, a communication board, device or human assistance
- Ask us what they can do to make communication go smoothly.
- Provide us with a trained communication assistant, if we need communication support in critical situations such as police, legal, justice and healthcare settings.
- Give us sufficient time to communicate as it takes us longer to communicate than someone who can speak.
- Tell us if they don't understand so that we can repeat or change our message.
- Use everyday language, speak clearly or show us what they are talking about, if we do not understand what they are saying.

Useful resources:

- About the communication access symbol at <https://www.cdacanada.com/resources/communication-access-symbol/>
- Webinar on ways to make your services communication accessible at <https://courses.cdacanada.com/courses/making-your-services-accessible-for-people-with-communication-disabilities/>
- Guidelines for making your services communication accessible at <https://www.cdacanada.com/resources/accessible-businesses-and-services/resources/guidelines-for-making-services-accessible/>

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