

"I Don't Want to be a Burden": The Impact of Aphasia on Marriage

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Background

Both the A-FROM and the LPAA models emphasize the importance of relationships for quality of life and rehabilitative success post-aphasia onset. Following the development of these models, there have been many studies on friendship relationships, however there continues to be a gap in literature on the impact that aphasia has on romantic relationships. In thinking about the importance of relationships on quality of life, how can the relationship that one has with a spouse be overlooked?

The limited work that has been completed on this topic has explored relationship satisfaction, communication, and intimacy, but has primarily focused on the experience of the non-aphasic spouse. The purpose of this study is to better understand the broad impact that aphasia has on marriage by conducting interviews with both spouses.

Research Question

What is the impact of aphasia on marriage?

Methods

Five married couples, each including one spouse with aphasia, participated in **semi-structured interviews**. A process of **thematic analysis** was utilized to code and generate themes from the data collected. Two rounds of coding occurred by the two authors.

- Avg. age of spouse **with** aphasia: **59.6 years**
- Avg. age of spouse **without** aphasia: **56 years**
- Avg. total length of relationship: **32 years**
- All couples were **heterosexual**.
- In **4/5** couples, the **husband** had aphasia.
- Cause of aphasia was **stroke** in all couples, averaging **5.4 years post-stroke**.

Results

Interview questions included topics of communication, intimacy, roles and responsibilities, and emotions. Five themes emerged from the data through thematic analysis:

1. Experience of the Spouse with Aphasia: Spouses with aphasia noted marked differences in their identity, characterized by a loss of their previous roles, subsequent depression, and feelings of guilt.

2. Experience of the Spouse without Aphasia: Spouses without aphasia often indicated an involuntary shift in identity as they took on more of their spouse's roles and responsibilities. Responses to caregiving varied between participants and during different stages of recovery.

3. Relationship Identity: In addition to the individual identities, the relationship identities were characterized by relationship dynamic permanence, intentionality, and changes to communication.

4. Shared Stroke Experience: All couples discussed navigating the stroke and early recovery, often characterized by a shared trauma and empathy for each other, indicating a strengthening experience for couples.

5. Impact on Shared Interests/Activities: Aphasia often impacted previous shared interests and bonding activities, resulting in social isolation, grief, and an evolution of the relationship.

Conclusions

- Aphasia impacts marriage in multiple areas, including **communication, identity, and emotions**.
- Marital impact **varies between couples** and during **different stages** of recovery.
- Further research is needed to understand the **impact of aphasia** on relationships, how couples **maintain their relationship** through the aphasia journey, and the **SLP's role** in supporting couples.

