



Episode #41 – In Conversation with Cathy Off

Janet Patterson, Chief of the Audiology & Speech-Language Pathology Service at VA Northern California, speaks with Cathy Off about creating and sustaining an aphasia group in a rural community.

Dr. Off is an associate professor in the School of Speech, Language, Hearing, & Occupational Sciences in the College of Health Professions and Biomedical Sciences at the University of Montana, where she directs the Big Sky Aphasia Program.

In today's episode you will learn:

- about disparities in health care for persons living in rural communities
- strategies to identify challenges specific to sustaining an aphasia group in a rural community
- how art, aphasia, and teaching and learning intersect in Missoula, Montana

Highlights of the Podversation with Cathy Off

Over the past several years Cathy Off has worked to establish a community aphasia group in Missoula, Montana, which is considered a rural area. In this podcast she describes her efforts to create this group as part of the health care system in the area, including activities such as integrating the Big Sky Aphasia Program with existing aphasia rehabilitation efforts, identifying strategies to overcome distance challenges, and helping group members become part of the local community. Highlights of Cathy's comments are organized into three areas: tactics to begin a community aphasia program; strategies to address challenges sustaining a group; and lessons learned along the way.

Beginning an aphasia group in a rural community

Cathy describes strategies she used to inform people with aphasia and their families about the Big Sky Aphasia Program; to provide information to speech-language pathology clinics in the area, in particular to assure these clinics that this program is collaborative and not competitive; and to cast as wide an information net as possible.

- Begin by speaking to established programs and providers to describe how your program enhances communication activities for persons with aphasia
- Consider public relations about the program as layers
 - Word of mouth – talk to as many people as possible about the program; persons who have a great experience in your group will share that experience with others
 - Written documents – provide literature at Health Fairs, campus and community newspaper articles, or university alumni publications
 - Electronic media - Facebook, email
- Realize that the marketing and advertising activities are ongoing
 - Annually seek new avenues to provide information and recruit members
 - Continue to connect with existing members and their families as well as community providers

Challenges in sustaining an aphasia program in a rural community

Most community aphasia programs face common challenges such as sustaining funding. Other challenges are unique to the rural setting and Cathy describes how she addressed them over the years.

- Assure providers in the tightly knit rural community that the group is collaborative and not in competition with existing rehabilitation facilities
- Describe the nature and purpose of a community aphasia group and how it complements existing, traditional therapy services
- Explain the concepts of psychosocial well-being and wellness, which may not be familiar to providers
- Consider how local weather and travel factors influence attendance decisions and group membership requirements
 - In Montana the winter weather conditions may cause group members to attend once a month rather than weekly
 - In the Big Sky Aphasia Program some members travel as many as 300 miles round trip to attend group which poses a time challenge
 - Consider the availability and reliability of public transportation
 - In Missoula public transportation is free
 - Transportation companies may be unreliable, especially if the person with aphasia does not have an advocate to arrange and manage transport
- Recognize the level of knowledge community providers have about aphasia rehabilitation following discharge from acute care
 - Provide education in as many avenues as possible about rehabilitation as an ongoing process

Lessons learned from the Big Sky Aphasia Program

- Once a schedule has been determined stick with it
- Find your niche in order to offer unique services
- Be open to collaborations, especially those that might not be thought of as traditional

- An art museum in Missoula developed a communication training program for their docents, largely based on their experience hosting a tour for the Big Sky Aphasia Program
- Invite people who want to volunteer with the group, to provide activities such as yoga and wellness awareness
- Be sure the activities come from the group members and are relevant to the group, and not decided by the leaders

To learn more about the Big Sky Aphasia Program please visit

<http://health.umt.edu/slhos/dewit-ritecare-clinic/Big%20Sky%20Aphasia%20Program/default.php>