Unspoken Struggles: The Role of Communication in Mental Health for Individuals with Disabilities

Pat Osbourn, MA, CCC
Program Director, Autism Programs/NM START
Associate Director, Center for Development and Disability

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START Model

The START (**S**ystemic-**T**herapeutic-**A**ssessment-**R**esources-**T**reatment) model is an evidence-informed model of integrated community crisis prevention & intervention services for individuals ages 6 and older with intellectual and developmental disabilities and mental health needs.

START was first developed in 1988 by Dr. Joan B. Beasley and was cited as a best practice in the 2002 US Surgeon General's report and by the National Academy of Sciences in 2016.

The **National Center for START Services** at the UNH Institute on Disability oversees the development, measurement and quality of START programs across the country.

Objectives

- Recognize the impact of communication barriers on the mental health of individuals with disabilities
- Identify inclusive communication practices and tools
- Analyze the relationship between communication access and psychological well being

Why Communication Matters

- Communication is a core human need
- Enables self-expression, connection, and access to care
- Barriers can be both visible and invisible for individuals with disabilities

Social Stigma and Discrimination

Impact of Communication Differences

Unique communication styles can lead to misjudgment and social exclusion of individuals with disabilities.

Mental Health Consequences

Social stigma can cause shame, low self-worth, and increased psychological distress among affected individuals.

Societal Attitudes and Marginalization

Devaluation of alternative communication methods contributes to the marginalization of people with disabilities.

Promoting Awareness and Inclusion

Encouraging acceptance of diverse communication fosters inclusive environments and respect for all individuals.

Impact on Relationships

Communication Barriers

Barriers in communication create misunderstandings and emotional distance, straining relationships significantly.

Emotional Impact

Loss of meaningful connections leads to isolation and worsens mental health among affected individuals.

Building Strong Relationships

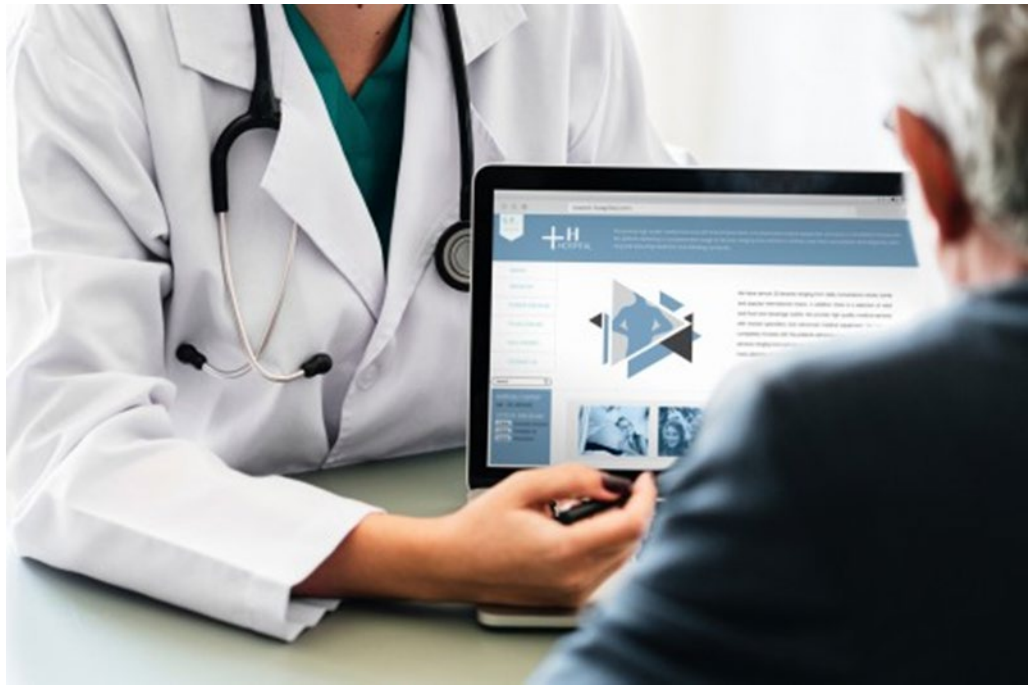
Patience, empathy, and accessible communication strategies foster trust and improve interpersonal connections.

Encouraging Dialogue

Open dialogue and alternative communication methods strengthen bonds and promote overall well-being.

Clinical Settings

- Miscommunication can lead to misdiagnosis or inadequate care
- Lack of accessible intake forms, interpreters, or trained staff
- Emotional distress from being misunderstood or ignored



Educational Settings

- Students may struggle to express needs or emotions
- Behavioral issues may mask underlying mental health concerns
- Importance of inclusive communication strategies in IEPs and classroom interactions

Community Settings

- Social exclusion due to inaccessible communication
- Limited participation in community programs or peer support
- Need for inclusive outreach and mental health resources

Types of Communication Barriers

- **Physical**: lack of assistive devices, inaccessible environments
- **Systemic**: policies that overlook communication needs
- **Attitudinal**: assumptions about capacity/competency
- **Technological**: limited access to AAC tools

What May Lead to Challenges/Differences in Communication

- Speech or language impairments
- Cognitive disabilities
- Sensory disabilities (e.g., hearing or vision loss)
- Neurodivergence (e.g., autism, ADHD)
- Challenges lead to barriers that affect emotional expression, help-seeking, and therapy participation

Assessing Individual Needs

- **Type of disability** (speech, hearing, cognitive, motor, visual)
- **Communication goals** (daily use, education, healthcare)
- **Environment** (home, school, work, public)
- **Preference of user**: ease of use, understanding of communication system

Involve the Support Network

- Include the individual in decision-making
- Consult caregivers, therapists, educators
- Respect preferences and cultural context

Inclusive Communication Tools To Evaluate

- ✓ **AAC Devices**: Speech-generating devices, communication boards, symbol-based apps.
- ✓ **Speech-to-Text and Text-to-Speech Software**: Converts spoken words to text and vice versa.
- ✓ **Sign Language Interpreters**: Facilitate communication for Deaf individuals.
- ✓ **Closed Captioning and Subtitles**: Provide text versions of spoken content.
- ✓ **Accessible Digital Platforms**: Screen reader compatibility, keyboard navigation, alt text.
- ✓ **Communication Passports**: Personalized documents outlining communication preferences and supports.

Inclusive Communication Strategies

- ✓ **Person-Centered Communication**: Tailor communication to individual needs and preferences.
- ✓ **Use of Plain Language**: Simplify complex terms and avoid jargon.
- ✓ **Active Listening**: Show patience, attentiveness, and validate feelings.
- ✓ **Visual Supports**: Use images, symbols, or diagrams to reinforce messages.
- ✓ **Multimodal Communication**: Combine verbal, written, visual, and tactile methods.
- ✓ **Cultural and Linguistic Sensitivity**: Respect diverse communication styles and norms.
- ✓ **Environmental Adjustments**: Reduce noise, improve lighting, and ensure accessibility.

Inclusive Communication Strategies

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Tips for Mental Health Providers

- Ask about preferred communication method
- Allow extra time for responses
- Use plain language; confirm understanding
- Use visual aids, yes/no questions, etc.
- Consult with SLPs when possible
- Validate ALL communication attempts
- Address the person directly
- Create a safe, low pressure environment
- Respect cultural and linguistic identity
- Do not misinterpret communication challenges as cognitive deficits

Trial and Feedback

- Allow time for trial use
- Gather feedback from user and support team
- Adjust or switch systems as needed

Training and Support

- Provide training for user and network
- Ensure ongoing technical and emotional support

Psychological Benefits of Communication Access

Emotional Expression

Accessible communication enables individuals to express feelings, reducing internal stress and promoting emotional balance.

Strengthened Social Connection

Inclusive communication fosters relationships and decreases feelings of isolation among individuals with disabilities.

Improved Self-Efficacy

Individuals gain confidence and advocacy skills through accessible communication, enhancing decision-making abilities.

Reduced Anxiety

Clear communication minimizes misunderstandings, lowering anxiety and fostering mental clarity and resilience

In Closing…“To be heard is to be healed”

Mental health challenges faced by individuals with disabilities are often made worse by barriers in communication.

For individuals with disabilities, communication is:

CONNECTION AND DIGNITY

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