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### **“Where are my friends?”**

#### **A narrative inquiry of friendship maintenance and dissolution in the early period post- stroke and aphasia.**

Any traumatic event like a stroke, which affects the brain, can cause someone to have many other health issues, including aphasia. Aphasia is a language disorder that impacts the ability to speak, listen, read, and write. These factors can easily cause someone to feel isolated, lonely, and can lead to depression. Since friendships help with social inclusion, contribute to the quality of life, and are often viewed as a common source of joy, they are viewed as a positive benefit to one recovering with aphasia. However, sadly most people report having minimal or no friends after being diagnosed. There is limited research regarding what causes one with aphasia to lose friends early on after stroke or other brain injury. Consequently, we used a qualitative data analysis from published narratives in order to gain a better understanding of why and how friendships dissolve in the early stages of aphasia post-stroke. Since our research is considered a qualitative research analysis, we did not have a specific hypothesis. Instead, we gathered information and let our data reveal the outcome.

We were able to begin our research immediately by searching through 15 books that were generated by people living with aphasia and their partners. These biographies and autobiographies helped direct us to finding significant information related to our research

topic. Our methodology consisted of searching for the word friend in each book, extracting each paragraph that included the word friend, coding each paragraph inductively, comparing the set of codes across the data set to group each pattern together, and transitioning each code into themes.

The information found throughout the books led us to the discovery of our four themes. The names of these themes consisted of “Different Journeys to Coping”, “Talking Used to be Such Fun”, “Most will Simply Evolve”, “Dedicated Networks are Willing to Stick Around”. Throughout the books, there were many common patterns found that led us to these four themes. For example, in “Different Journeys to Coping”, we found many reasons friendships drifted, such as: having a new identity, spousal issues, early bad encounters, physiological challenges and lack of knowledge. Friendships begin to dissolve due to the person with aphasia’s new identity because they have feelings of embarrassment of the new person that they are and early bad encounters they face with their friends after their stroke. Spousal issues with friends emerge because the spouse is trying to help their partner, but it ends up interfering with the friend and their connection with the spouse. Many friends do not understand how to cope with aphasia, and this can cause the person with aphasia to experience physiological challenges because of their lack of knowledge.

We noticed that many friendships drift away in the early stages of aphasia due to the lack of language. This brought us to our next theme, “Talking Used to be Such Fun.” Communication is such an important ingredient of friendships, as well as a quality of life. Without it, it is a struggle for one to exchange information, express wants and needs, and connect with others. We saw this often throughout our research. For example, in the book, *Identity theft*, Debra Meyerson said, “I cherish the same values, love the same family, work with the same determination. But I can no longer teach, talk as easily with family and friends, or ride a bike on my own.” Due to the lack of communication, friends began to talk over or for the person with aphasia which can cause a lack of independence and a sense of frustration. These friendships may easily start to dissolve due to the struggles faced through limited success in interacting with others.

What led us to our next theme “Most will Simply Evolve” was a quote from Debra Meyerson in the book *Identity Theft* that said, “Inevitably, relationships change after stroke. A few people will disappoint; a few will astound. Some friendships will tighten, and others will drift. Most will simply evolve.” In some ways friendships are better, in some ways they are worse, but overall, they are just *different*. Friendships aren’t influenced just by the impairment of aphasia, but all other “ripples” that happen such as their new lifestyle and hobbies. We realized that many friendships are built on commonality. Sometimes people are only friends because of a single connection, and

many may not realize this until a traumatic situation like this occurs that challenges the friendship. We also found that because friendships are a two-way street, important friendships will strengthen and evolve while weak ones fade. Friends are changing their lives and they are showing up, but they are not always getting things back, this can impact the friend negatively because they feel like they aren't being cared for, but it often makes the people with aphasia feel like a burden as well.

Last, the final theme that our work revealed was “Dedicated networks are willing to stick around.” Friends are often eager to help in any way they can in the early stages of aphasia, but it is less common as the recovery process continues. This is indicated in the book, *Identity Theft*, when Kim said, “She offered to help with anything I needed, from the logistics of travel to putting in my contacts. She said she'd help make space for me to have fun, whatever that meant, and whatever that took.” Since committed friends are hard to come by at this stage, we found that people with aphasia are appreciative for the friends that did stay and were dedicated to helping during their time of need. These friends become dedicated to helping, have a positive outlook, are selfless, and give hope to one struggling. These are the types of friends who stay. This is proof that dedicated friends are the ones who stick around, and you can depend on most.

Since beginning this project, we have improved our critical analysis skills and learned how to look at data as a whole. We extracted a large amount of data and then we had to learn to pick the significant pieces that were truly relevant to our research. To find our themes, we had to stay focused on the broad picture to see how our data aligned with our main research question. This research experience has affected our interests and career goals because prior to this research we had limited knowledge of aphasia. Now that we know more about aphasia, we have found ourselves even more interested in the topic and truly cannot wait to make a difference, as a future speech-language pathologist.

#### "Different Journeys to Coping"

- A new identity
- Spousal issues
- Early bad encounters
- Physiological challenges
- Lack of knowledge

#### "Talking Used to be Such Fun"

- Lack of speech causes friendships to drift away.
- Communication is such an important ingredient of friendships and a quality of life.

#### "Most Will Simply Evolve"

- Friendships are just *different*.
- Friendships are built on commonality
- Important friendships will strengthen and evolve while weak one's fade.