

Panel: Things I Wish My Communication Partners Knew

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Short Abstract

Effective communication is crucial for fostering interaction and inclusion. This panel brings together individuals who use alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) devices to share their insights and experiences. The discussion will focus on the essential aspects of interacting with AAC communicators, shedding light on the nuances and challenges they face.

Through personal stories and sharing of their lived experience using AAC, this panel aims to bridge gaps in understanding and promote more empathetic and effective communication practices. Panelists will share practical strategies that have either worked for them or that they would like to see happen, for creating inclusive environments that respect and accommodate diverse communication needs. Hearing these real-life stories will make these concepts more relatable and impactful for the audience.

The discussion will explore communication in different contexts, including the workplace, community, and with family and friends, based on the panelists' personal experiences. This panel does not aim to provide one-size-fits-all strategies, but to encourage attendees to reflect on their own communication, and be adaptable and inclusive depending on the situation.

Attendees will gain valuable insights into how they can enhance their interactions with AAC communicators and contribute to a more inclusive society. This discussion not only aims to raise awareness but also to empower all participants to create accessible communication environments.

Long Abstract

Effective communication is the foundation of connection, inclusion, and collaboration. For individuals who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices, communication can be both empowering and challenging, depending on how well communication partners understand their unique needs. This panel, titled "*Things I Wish My Communication Partners Knew*," brings together a group of AAC users to share their lived experiences and insights, with the goal of enhancing understanding and promoting more inclusive communication practices.

The panelists will share personal stories of how communication with AAC has shaped their lives, focusing on both the successes and the barriers they've encountered. The conversation will explore the essential aspects of interacting with AAC communicators, shining a light on common misconceptions, frustrations, and the emotional weight of communication for AAC

users. It will also provide actionable strategies for communication partners to create environments that respect and accommodate diverse communication needs.

Key Themes:

- **Understanding AAC Devices:** Panelists will highlight what they wish people understood about the technical and personal complexities of using AAC devices. This includes breaking down misconceptions, such as the assumption that AAC devices are "easy" to use or that they work the same way for every individual.
- **Respect and Patience in Communication:** The importance of patience in conversations with AAC users will be explored in detail. Panelists will share experiences where a lack of understanding or respect made communication difficult, as well as examples of what respectful communication looks like. They will emphasize that communication at a slower pace does not reflect cognitive ability but rather the process of accessing their words.
- **Engagement and Inclusion:** Practical advice will be given on how communication partners can be more active and inclusive in conversations with AAC users. The panelists will discuss strategies for ensuring full participation in social, community, and professional settings, emphasizing that AAC users deserve the same opportunities to contribute meaningfully to discussions.
- **Supporting Autonomy and Privacy:** Communication partners often unintentionally overlook the privacy and autonomy of AAC users. This section will focus on how partners can respect personal boundaries while using communication devices and how they can support AAC users in leading conversations, not just responding to them.
- **Emotional and Social Support:** Emotional support is just as important as technical understanding. Panelists will address the social dynamics of communication and how communication partners can offer not only practical help but also the emotional encouragement that is often necessary in difficult conversations or social situations.
- **Clarification and Error Correction:** One key challenge in AAC communication is handling misunderstandings or errors. Panelists will share how communication partners can ask for clarification or offer corrections without creating frustration or embarrassment.

Panel Goals:

Through personal narratives, this panel seeks to bridge gaps in understanding and create empathy for AAC users. The panel will offer a combination of emotional, practical, and technical insights, equipping attendees with the knowledge to foster more inclusive and effective communication environments.

The discussions will also address how communication needs differ across various settings—whether in the workplace, social environments, or within families—and how communication partners can adapt their approaches accordingly. Panelists will encourage Speech Pathologists and communication partners to be flexible, creative, and patient in their interactions.

Conclusion:

Attendees will leave with a better understanding of how to interact effectively with AAC users, avoiding common pitfalls while building more meaningful, inclusive communication practices. The goal is not to present one-size-fits-all solutions but to highlight the need for adaptability and awareness in every communication scenario. By focusing on practical strategies and lived

experiences, the panel will empower both AAC users and their communication partners to work together in creating a more inclusive society.