

Let's Talk About Love: Romantic Relationships, Intimacy, & Aphasia



National Aphasia Association
Ask the Expert
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Meet the Experts



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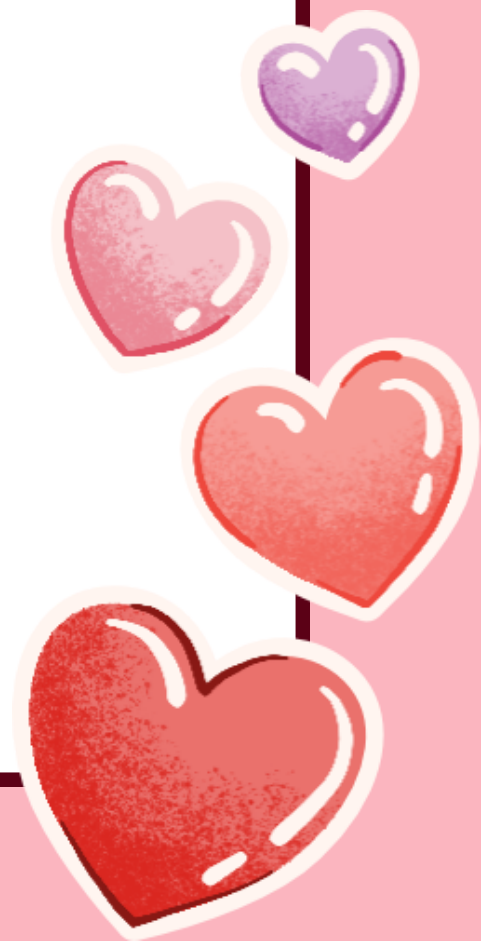


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Agenda

- Changes to Relationships after Aphasia
- Communication Breakdowns
- Intimacy & Sexuality After Aphasia
- Tips & Resources for Maintaining Connection
- Q & A



First, this is a safe space.

What happens here stays here.

You do not have to share.

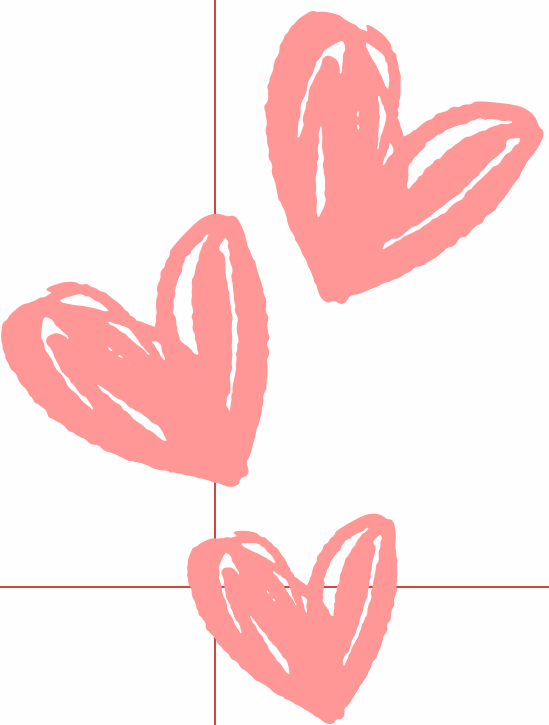
The topic of relationships post-aphasia is not often talked about. So if nothing else, we want this information to be provided to those who may need it, in an aphasia-friendly manner.





Changes to Relationships after Aphasia

Let's begin by talking about why this topic isn't addressed by healthcare providers.



“Healthcare professionals see relationships and sex intervention as a topic requiring specialized training that they don’t have.”

(Dyer & das Nair, 2013)

WHOSE JOB IS IT?

**Physical
Therapist?**

Physician?

**Speech
Therapist?**

Nurse?

**Occupational
Therapist?**

**Marriage
& Family
Therapist?**

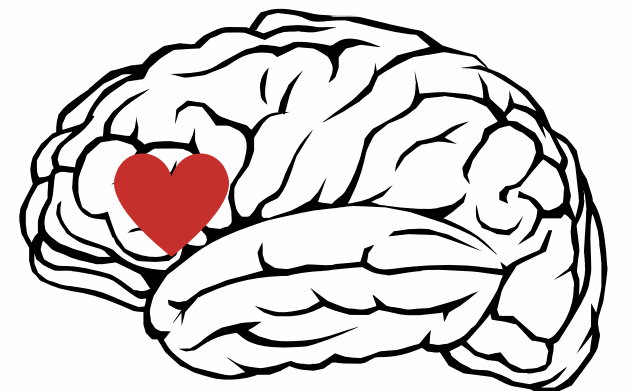
A woman with curly hair is sitting on a bed, covering her face with her hands. In the background, a man is lying on the bed, looking away. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting a somber or emotional moment.

What ends up happening is...

No one addresses it.

Common changes to relationships after aphasia

- Changes to identities and roles
- Not feeling romantic anymore
- Guilt
- Fear of another stroke
- Loss of independence
- Life revolving around recovery (therapy, appointments, medications, etc.)
- Communication breakdowns, frustration
- Difficulty making decisions together & managing conflict
- Loss of partnership
- Grief
- Change in body image and self-esteem
- Changes to physical and sexual intimacy



Couples know that their relationship is different now,
but they often don't know how to address it with
each other or with healthcare providers.

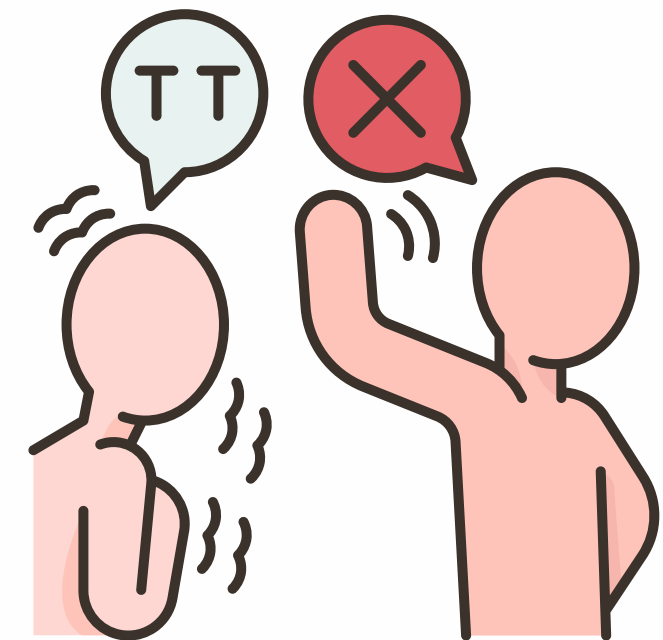




Communication Breakdowns

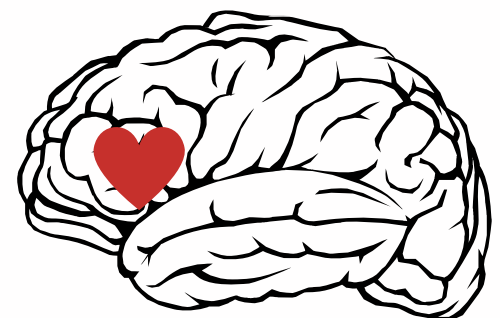
Communication Breakdowns

- Guaranteed with aphasia, regardless of length of relationship, closeness, connectedness, experience, or training. It happens!
- Communication breakdowns can cause frustration, sadness, loneliness, and depression. Breakdowns can make you feel less connected from your spouse.
- It can make decision making and conflict management feel impossible.



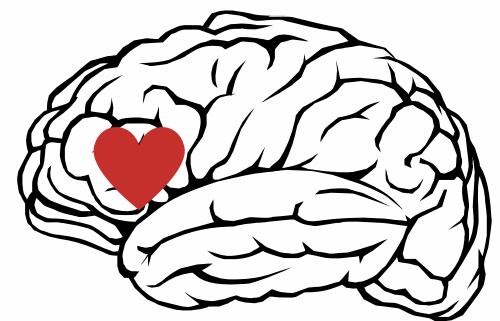
Tips for Spouses *with* Aphasia

- Establish a **signal** that lets your **partner** know **when to jump in** to help you.
- Use **communication strategies** to help you communicate (writing, drawing, communication board, AAC device, apps, pictures, and more!)
- Take a **deep breath**. Stay calm. **Reset**. Try again.
- **Advocate** for yourself! **Tell** your **partner** what is **important** to you. Tell them what you need.
- Remind yourself, “I am lovable, I am desirable. I am not a burden.”



Tips for Spouses *without* Aphasia

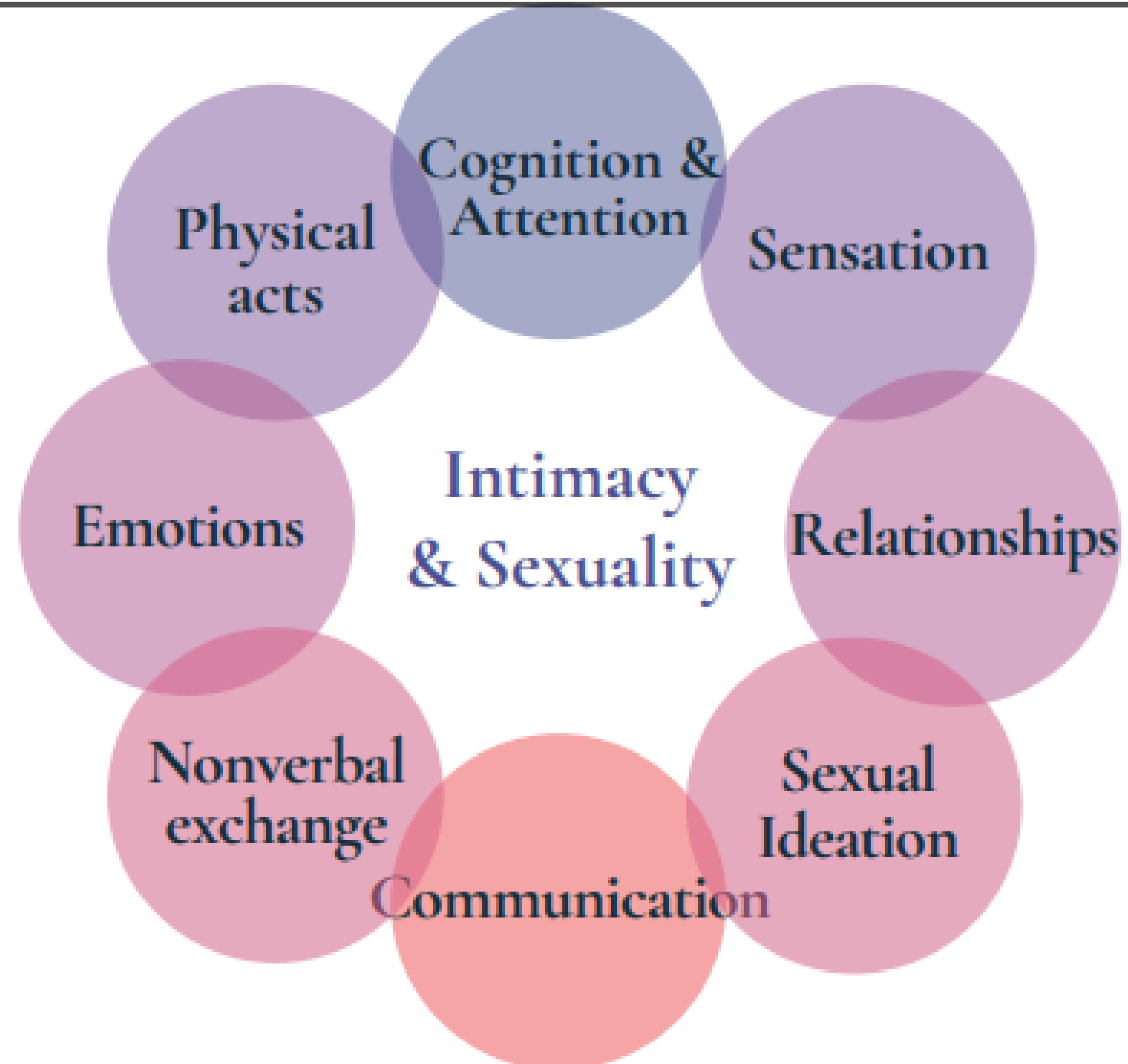
- Until you see that signal from your spouse, **stay silent**. Jumping in and trying to guess, or finish their thought, can further confuse/frustrate them, and take away their communication independence.
- When polled, the #1 thing people with aphasia want is... patience.
- Take a **deep breath**. Stay calm. **Reset**. Try again.
- Use communication strategies!
- Help your spouse maintain their independence. Remember, they are still competent adults.
- Don't forget to take care of yourself.





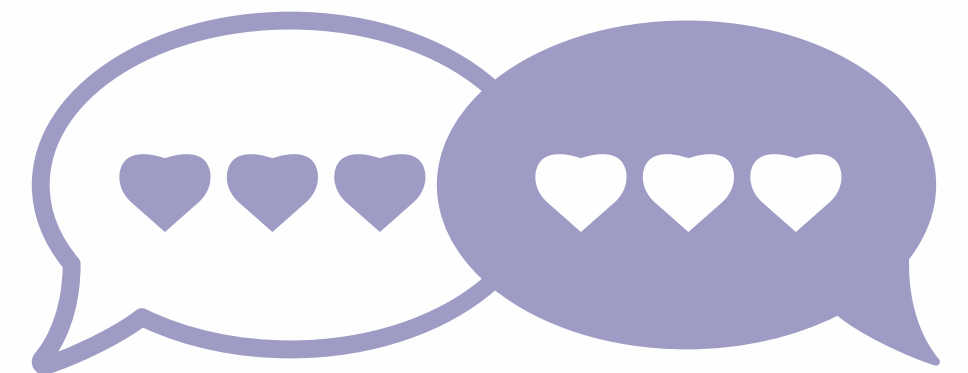
Intimacy & Sexuality after Aphasia

Intimacy & sexuality are complex.



How does aphasia impact sexual relationships?

- Difficulty communicating desires
- Changes to/difficulty with intimacy initiation
- Reduced emotional intimacy
- Feeling like a patient/nurse or child/parent relationship
- Changed roles during intimacy
- Changed body image/self esteem/feelings of being desirable
- Comparing then to now





The good news?
Most couples affected
by aphasia still have
sexual desire for each
other!

...they just aren't talking about it



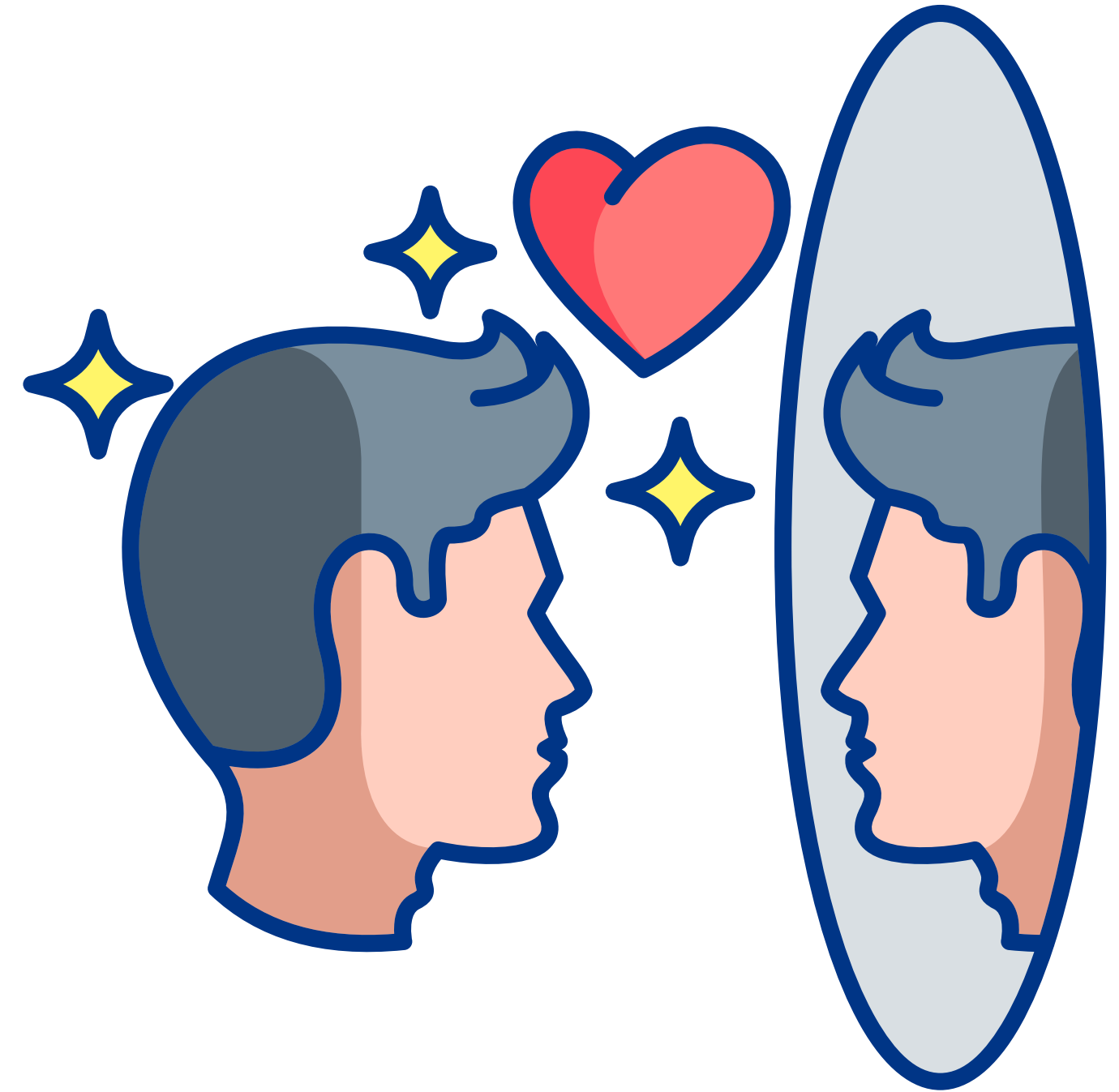
Tips & Resources for Maintaining Connection

Remember to still be a couple.

Spend time together where you aren't talking about the stroke, or practicing your speech, or being a caregiver.

Practice Affirmations

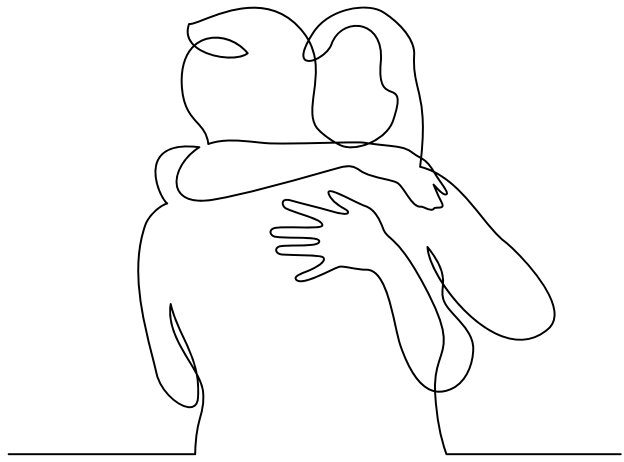
- I am lovable.
- I am learning to love my new body.
- I am not a burden.
- I'm doing the best I can.
- I have a great personality.
- Every day is a new day.
- I am worthy of affection.
- It's okay to take care of me.
- We can get through hard things.



Tips for Physical Intimacy

- Schedule intimate or cuddling time
- Make a plan for before intimacy
- Ask each other questions about sex! (*When do you want to be intimate? What do you need now? What do I need?*)
- Find non-verbal methods of initiation (*signal, gesture, alternative communication tools, etc.*)
- Make & practice intimacy scripts! (*Let's go to the bedroom, kiss me, I love you, etc.*)
- Consider talking to your SLP, PT, OT, or physician!

The 20 Second Hug & The 6 Second Kiss



Drs. John & Julie Gottman are relationship researchers. They have **studied couples for decades** and can now predict if a couple will remain married or divorce with 90% accuracy! They have many tips for **making marriage work**.

One of their tips is the “**20 second hug**” and/or the “**6 second kiss**”. After 20 seconds of hugging or 6 seconds of kissing, the brain **reduces cortisol** (the stress hormone) and **increases oxytocin** (the love hormone)! By engaging in this hug or kiss everyday, you can **improve your connection** with your partner and start to **build intimacy** outside the bedroom.



Set Intimacy Goals

My partner and I are having regular and enjoyable sexual interactions.



Ideal intimacy outcome

We talk about intimacy & our needs regularly.



Improved intimacy level

My partner and I have not had sex since the stroke, but we still show love towards each other physically.



Current intimacy level

My partner and I no longer touch, kiss, or hug each other.



Worsened intimacy level

My partner and I have lost all intimacy in our relationship.



Worst intimacy outcome

Remember...

Aphasia does not have to define your relationship,
but it can **contribute** to your **strength**.

Aside from the stroke, think about the **most difficult thing** you two have **navigated together**.

You got through that.

You **can** get through this too.



Resources

BOOKS:

When your spouse has a stroke: Caring for your partner, yourself, and your relationship. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Palmer, Sara , & Palmer, Jeffrey B. (2011). <https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/when-your-spouse-has-stroke>

The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability: For all of us who live with disabilities, chronic pain, and illness by M. Kaufman
<http://www.amazon.com/The-Ultimate-Guide-Sex-Disability/dp/1573443042>

HEALTH AND AGING: SEXUALITY LATER IN LIFE:

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/sexuality-later-life#safe>

<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/aging-well/better-sex-as-you-age.htm>

INTIMACY INFORMATION

What does a sex therapist do? <http://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/features/what-does-sex-therapist-do>

Sex and Intimacy after Stroke: <https://www.stroke.org/en/about-stroke/effects-of-stroke/emotional-effects/intimacy-after-stroke>



**Thank you for
attending!**

**What questions
do you have?**