



Common Word Finding Problems as We Age

- It is normal for word-finding problems to increase as we age.
- It is normal for us to be slower in processing information as we age.
- An increase in “tips of the tongue” is evident as early as the mid-thirties.
- The length of time before the missing word is recalled also increases with age.
- Difficulty in retrieving words does not mean that words are lost; there is no evidence that we lose vocabulary in normal aging.
- There is little evidence for any change in semantic structure (the organizations of words in memory) with age.
- Older adults probably have more trouble dealing with large amounts information.
- Older adults may develop different strategies as they age, probably to accommodate their decline in processing speed and processing capacity.



What do we mean by word-finding problems?

- Tip of the tongue experiences.
- Increasing use of circumlocutions rather than specific terms (e.g., “I wonder where the thing that goes here is”)
- Use of empty phrases, indefinite terms, and pronouns without antecedents (i.e., referring to something or someone as “it” or “him/her” without identifying them by name)
- Increased frequency of pauses.
- These problems are all characteristic of Alzheimer’s but also, to a much lesser extent, of normal aging.

Verbal fluency declines with age.

Verbal fluency is measured by how many words fitting specific criteria you can generate in a fixed time (for example, how many types of fruit you can list in a minute).

Verbal fluency often, but now always, declines as we age. This may be partly because older adults are slower to access information.

Tip of the tongue experiences increase with age.

There is no evidence that normal older adults actually lose the meanings of words they know.



Older adults do however have more word finding problems than younger adults. In particular, as we get older we tend to experience more situations when the word we are searching for is “on the tip of my tongue.”

Picture naming errors also increase, though not perhaps until the eighties.

Some studies have found a decline in older adult’s ability to produce words when given their definitions, but others haven’t.

Common Causes of Word Finding Problems:

- **Stroke:** This is the most common cause of word finding difficulty in adults. Problems with word retrieval are usually associated with an acquired language disorder known as aphasia.
- **Head Trauma:** The left hemisphere of our brain is responsible for our language skills. Damage to brain tissue in this general area could result in word finding difficulty.
- **Dementia:** Word finding difficulty can sometimes be an early sign of Alzheimer’s.
- **Tumors:** A brain tumor can also cause word retrieval difficulties. This largely depends on where the tumor is developing. If it invades the left hemisphere, word finding difficulty can become a problem.
- **Aging:** This is a natural cause of word finding difficulty. As the brain ages, chemical changes occur and memory abilities can begin to fade.

Intensive Speech & Language Pathology services can help address problems in this area. Medicare will reimburse for such services.



Word Finding Strategies

A strategy is a plan of action used to achieve a specific goal.

Sometimes that plan of action involves changing the way we do things in order to be successful. This is the case with word finding.

Since your brain is not giving you the words you want, you must discover new ways to find them.

Speech language pathologists teach many successful strategies that help individuals with word finding difficulties. All of these strategies have one thing in common:

They use an individual's strengths to help overcome their weaknesses.

What is circumlocution?

Circumlocution is the act of describing many features of an object, event or action without saying the exact word for the object, event or action.

It is a common strategy used by individuals with word finding difficulties. When at a loss for an intended word they will often describe the word to get their message across (and at the same time try to cue the word they're looking for).

For example, if an individual with word finding difficulty couldn't think of the word axe, they might say:



“It’s the thing that chops wood. You know, lumberjacks use them; it has a long handle and a sharp edge. They chop down trees with it...what is that thing called?”

Circumlocution can be useful in that it may help us think of missing word. It also helps keep the flow of conversation going.



Practical Mental Exercises that You Can Do to Boost Your Language Skills

1. **Reading everyday** including the dictionary is one good way to increase your vocabulary. With an increased vocabulary other parts of language such as word finding and fluency will improve.
2. **Practice reviewing the names of your friends and peers** by mentally associating a name with their face.
3. **Take any letter of the alphabet and try and state aloud as many words as you can that start with that letter.** With practice you may notice that your list of words generated gets longer.
4. **Write a short segment on your day's experience in a journal.** This will help improve the motor skill of writing. Research suggests that writing with a passion also improves language skills.
5. **Work on your public speaking** as this is a wonderful exercise to stimulate the brain and your language skills. Talk about what you love and your anxiety will be reduced.
6. **Crossword puzzles** are fine as they promote reading and vocabulary.
7. **Name objects** that you see as you walk about the community.
8. **Work on the art of the story telling or telling a joke!**
9. **A great website is www.fitbrains.com**
10. Use **the alphabet to cue the word you are thinking of when experiencing word finding difficulties...** recite the alphabet...a,b,c,d,e,f,g.....g! "I was trying to think of the word goat!"