

BRAIN Waves

Good Vibes for the Arkansas Brain Injury Community

VOL. 5, Issue 1, Winter 2023

SIX TIPS FOR COMMUNICATION AFTER A BRAIN INJURY

Ordering food from a drive-thru restaurant, chatting with friends in a noisy lobby, and talking to family over the phone. These are all common social routines that rely on good communication skills. A brain injury can cause speech challenges that make communication and socializing harder. After a brain injury, it is common to have speech struggles like "slurred" speech, low volume, speech that is too fast or too slow, and mumbling.

Learning to use speaking tools and changing the environment can lead to easier conversations. If you are having trouble with clear speech after a brain injury, here are some tips that may help:

1. **Slow Down.** Slow down your speaking rate and place longer pauses between words.
2. **Pace Yourself.** Talking for long periods of time can lead to voice strain and use more effort or energy. This extra effort can also cause fatigue, which can in turn affect the clearness of speech. Take breaks to recharge.
3. **Over-Articulate and Break It Down.** Practice over-articulating the sounds of each word. This means that you will practice exaggerating each sound in a word. You can also break down longer words into smaller pieces. Words can even be broken down syllable-by-syllable to make them easier to understand.
4. **Consider Your Environment.** How loud or distracting is the current environment? Try to reduce the noise or move your conversation to a quieter location. Is the room well-lit? Check to see if your listener can see your face as you speak because visual clues can be helpful.
5. **Practice With Others.** Join a local community support group for a chance to practice new speaking habits in a supportive environment. Share your goals and ask for feedback from others.
6. **See a Speech Therapist.** Some people need special strategies to help them overcome speech issues. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are health care professionals who can listen to your speech and offer helpful treatment options for your speech troubles. Ask your primary care physician (PCP) for more information.

Resources

https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/dysarthria/

https://www.brainline.org/article/communication-effects-after-brain-injury

ASK the Specialist

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Suggest a topic! Email us at
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THE TRRP TEAM HAS A **NEW NAME!**

UAMS | Institute for Digital Health & Innovation

Brain Injury Program



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Trauma Rehabilitation Resources Program

TBI SPP Traumatic Brain Injury State Partnership Program

FAMILY STORY: LAWSON HETHER

AS TOLD TO KRISTEN ALEXANDER



Lawson and Kristin at Timber Ridge

In November 2020, Lawson Hether was a senior in high school and a car fanatic. At only 17 years old, he had rebuilt the engine on his Mazda Miata and he loved to drive like a racecar driver. According to his mom, Kristin Hether, Lawson was an arrogant teen with a need for speed. Still, he had a big heart and a great work ethic. He loved missions learning, his Miata, and fish tanks.

The day after Thanksgiving, after leaving a friend's house, Lawson took a curve too fast, ran off the road, flipped his car and hit a tree. The car was upside down and so was Lawson, secured in the driver's seat by his seat belt.

In a Caring Bridge journal entry to family and friends, Kristin wrote, "The accident occurred in front of a house where the homeowner was sitting outside and ran to the scene. He and another neighbor cut Lawson's seat belt and gently lowered him to the ground." That man turned out to be an old friend of Lawson's grandparents.

Lawson was taken to Arkansas Children's Hospital, where he was found to have a diffuse axonal injury (DAI), meaning that the impact had caused little tears throughout his brain tissue. Despite being in a coma, his body was very active, pulling at his tubes and wiggling around to get comfortable. Because of the COVID-19 virus, only one parent was allowed to visit Lawson, so Kristin and her husband Aaron took shifts with him at the hospital.

In only a matter of days, Lawson progressed to semi-comatose and started short therapy sessions. Despite being paralyzed on one side, he took 10 assisted steps just one week after the accident. By two weeks out, he was nodding and shaking his head yes and no, and showing new signs of awareness. Kristin's journal entries showed her excitement and gratitude.

Then on December 14, after two and a half weeks of progress, Lawson had a stroke in his room after physical therapy, right in front of his mom and a nurse. He was rushed to surgery to remove a clot in his brain. For the next few days, the family could only wait. Lawson was in another coma — medically-induced this time, with drains in his brain to keep the swelling down. However, his brain was swelling to critical levels, and the family started preparing for the possibility that they might have to let him go.

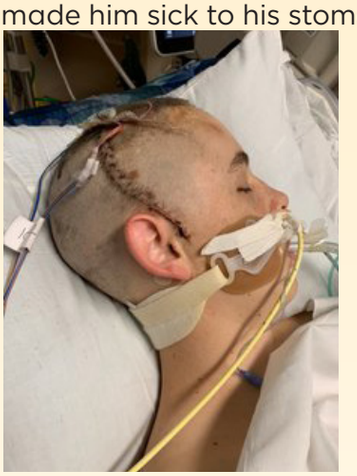
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On December 18, Kristin's journal entry seemed prepared to say goodbye. With little hope for Lawson's survival, she wrote about Lawson's faith and knowing that "Lawson will be made whole in the life to come." Later the same day, her tone shifted as she reported that a CT scan had shown improvement. She wrote, "this has put us back into the game for now!!".

> "I have totally changed my outlook on life for the better. I am nicer, believe it or not, and I am closer to God."

The waiting was back on as the swelling decreased, and Lawson was gradually weaned off supports. For the next few weeks, scans and reports kept coming back "better than expected," and Lawson moved back to a regular hospital room and then to Baptist Health Rehabilitation Institute (BHRI), for further rehab.

Looking back, Kristin said her time in the hospital with Lawson was really fueled by adrenaline. "I felt like his watchdog," she says. She asked lots of questions, sometimes pushing back on the care team's medicine or diet choices. As his mother, Kristin could tell when something was not right. When a medicine made him sick to his stomach, she noticed and talked to the doctors, who changed the plan. After that, Lawson was able to feel better and work harder in his therapies.



Lawson, 10 days after brain surgery to remove a clot

Lawson's dad Aaron would take shifts at the hospital when he could, although he had to spend more time at work. Kristin cherished those moments because she got to spend time with their youngest son, Luke. Aaron had a special way with Lawson that helped motivate him in his recovery. He always brought speakers to listen to their favorite music together.

After 1 month at BHRI, Lawson went to "brain camp" (as the family calls it) at NeuroRestorative Timber Ridge in Benton, where he stayed for 9 months.

He was nonverbal, which made staying in the cabins difficult, because he could not ask for what he needed. He remembers being really depressed. Some of the other residents were loud, so it was hard to rest. Despite these challenges, Lawson adjusted and continued to get better. He even started coming home on the weekends and was able to walk unassisted at graduation.

After Timber Ridge, "Lawson returned to Little Rock Catholic High, taking a full schedule of courses, even though he didn't need many credits to graduate. He pushed the other students in P.E. class with his performance. He could run a mile and do 50 push ups.

Once he finished school, Lawson knew he needed to do more work on his recovery. He asked to go back to "brain camp", and to the Hethers' surprise, they were able to work it out with insurance. Because of the progress he had made, he was able to enter Phase 2 this time, which he really likes.

Lawson works really hard in therapy. Kristin says he has always had a great work ethic, and that shines in his therapies. He is still working very hard on his speaking. His voice is not at full strength, so he often uses his phone to communicate with others. He also has trouble with impulse control at times.

The accident caused big changes to Lawson's personality. He is not shy to tell others that he was "a huge jerk" before his accident. Kristin describes him before the accident as arrogant and really mean to his younger brother. In many ways, the family likes the "new" Lawson better. If you meet him today, it would be hard to believe who he was before. He has a sweet smile and seems kind, with a great sense of humor. Lawson said, "I have totally changed my outlook on life for the better. I am nicer, believe it or not, and I am closer to God. I still have a lot of work to do, though, just as anyone else."

Lawson has lots of dreams for his future. Before his accident, he was really into math and science, but now he struggles more with that. He is interested in occupational therapy, welding, and working on cars again.

Continued on page 4

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Continued from page 3

He can still remember many parts of the car, but not how to fix them.

As a caregiver, Kristin is still wrestling with the future. She knows Lawson could be in her care permanently, and that is a future she had not planned for. She said, "I know when he comes home from Timber Ridge, it is going to rock my world because we are very different people. He is very driven and needs lots of activity and routine. I am a slow mover, less structured and I'm scared because I feel selfish. I don't want to have to do that, but I will." She also has fears about his behaviors being misunderstood by people in the world if he is independent one day.

Despite all the trials of the brain injury, Lawson says it has been a blessing because he doesn't cut others down like he used to. He has a lot of trust to build back with his brother. It was all a big strain on Luke, the youngest, who was home alone for much of the pandemic, while the family was in the hospital. Kristin expressed that it was really hard to divide time between her sons when Lawson needed so much support.



Lawson shows off an ROTC award and scholarship after graduation.

Lawson's advice to other people with brain injuries is simple: Stick it out. You can do it!

Kristin's advice:

- Advocate. Speak up when something seems off.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions. Do your best to keep up with what is going on in your loved one's care.
- You can't answer the question, "why". You have to look at what you can do from here, and realize that your life is changed forever. It's just one day at a time.
- Don't compare your recovery to someone else's.

TBI SPP
Traumatic Brain Injury
State Partnership Program

Arkansas Brain Injury Council

The Arkansas Brain Injury Council meets four times a year to discuss the progress and plans for how to make our state better for people living with brain injury. All our meetings are open to the public, and we would love to have you attend!

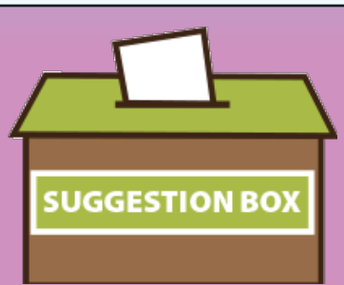
At this time, all meetings are being held online, so you can attend from the comfort of your home! Here is our next scheduled meeting time:

- Feb 7, 2023 at 10 a.m.

If you would like to receive email or text reminders with the links for these meetings, please let us know. You can email your name, contact information, and notification preferences to Amber Watson at awatson@uams.edu.

If you miss a meeting, no worries. You can keep up with our efforts by visiting:

atrp.ar.gov/tbi-state-partnership-program



SCAN ME

Got Ideas for Arkansas?

We want to hear from you!

Visit our short survey here (or scan the QR code above):

https://tinyurl.com/ARideashare

RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT

MULTIPLE **FREE** TREATMENT OPPORTUNITIES

12-Week Brain Injury Recovery Workshop, VIRTUAL meetings starting in March:

Work with a neuropsychologist and content experts to gain new knowledge and skills after TBI. Here are some of the topics addressed:

- Improved Thinking Skills (cognitive rehabilitation)
- Community Support
- Pain Management
- Healthy Relationships
- Adjustment to Injury

To join, contact Dianne Campbell at **dcampbell4@uams.edu**. You will go through a brief screening process to be sure you qualify. This workshop will be held a few times each year, so we will do our best to match you with dates that work for you. Please let us know if you need assistance with access to a computer.

Open to patients over 18 who have experienced a moderate to severe traumatic brain injury (or other acquired brain injury) and speak English. We are unable to enroll patients with receptive aphasia or those who cannot attend the full 12 weeks.

Conway Brain Injury Community

Faculty and students from the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) offer a free weekly treatment program for people living with brain injury. The goal is to improve the members' occupational performance and overall health and well-being.

This group will meet at UCA on Wednesdays from 3:30-5:30, starting Feb. 1.

Each week's session includes 3 parts:

- Arm ability training, which promotes hand, wrist, elbow, and shoulder recovery for clients who have mild to moderate loss of function in their upper extremity
- Support group, to meet with peers and strengthen community
- Health coaching to teach health skills and assist with setting and meeting goals

To join, contact Kassidy Thompson at (501) 269-6794.

Virtual and In-Person Music Therapy Groups

The Brain Injury Program is hoping to start FREE music therapy group sessions. Students could choose to meet online or in-person (in Little Rock). We need enough participants to get started, so please sign up if you are interested! Dates will be chosen by group and instructor availability. Most likely, these groups will meet every-other week.

Not sure what music therapy can do for you? Music therapy can help with processing, memory, speech, and even walking (gait), depending on the need and approach used.

Let us know you are interested! Use your phone camera to go to our survey with this QR code:

OR, visit the survey site using this address:

https://tinyurl.com/TBIMTform

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A SUPPORT GROUP FOR EVERYONE!

Our partners at Sources for Community Living in Northwest Arkansas have been working hard to offer support group access for every member of the family. We are excited to share that we now have THREE categories of online support groups, with hopefully more to come in the future!

Support groups are a positive place to meet people who understand your struggles, whether you are a survivor or a caregiver. They can also be a good place to learn new skills and strategies for living with your (or your loved one's) injury. The great thing about these groups is they are all online, so you can join from anywhere! Here are our current options:

For Adults with Brain Injury: Every Tuesday at 1 p.m.

For Caregivers: 1st Monday of every month at 2:30 p.m.

To Join:

Download Ring Central Meeting to your computer or smartphone, click Join Meeting and type the meeting ID: **894 179 693**

-or-

Type this link into your browser:

https://v.ringcentral.com/join?jid=894179693

No internet? No problem: Call +1 (650) 242-4929, type the above meeting ID then press #.

For more information contact NeCol Whitehead at nwhitehead@arsources.org or call/text 479-802-3903.

For Teens (ages 14-18) with Any Disability

Meets the 2nd & 4th Thursday of the month from 4:30-5:30 p.m.

- Know yourself, what you need, and how to get it
- Build relationships with peers who have similar experiences
- A safe place to talk about struggles and challenges

To sign up, contact Kasi Miller at kmiller@arsources.org or 479-802-3907 (calls or texts welcome).

Sources
Helping People with Disabilities Live Independently.

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Social Security/ Disability POINTERS

SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS INCREASE IN 2023

By Tonya Cater, Social Security Public Affairs Specialist

Approximately 70 million Americans will see an 8.7% increase in their Social Security benefits and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments in 2023. On average, Social Security benefits will increase by more than $140 per month starting in January.

Federal benefit rates increase when the cost of living rises, as measured by the Department of Labor's Consumer Price Index (CPI-W). The CPI-W rises when inflation increases, leading to a higher cost of living. This change means prices for goods and services, on average, are higher. The cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) helps to offset these costs.

We mailed COLA notices throughout the month of December to retirement, survivors, and disability beneficiaries, SSI recipients, and representative payees. If you misplaced your notice, you can securely obtain your Social Security COLA notice online using the Message Center in your personal *my*_Social Security account.

If you prefer to access these types of notices online and not receive the mailed notices, you can log in to your personal *my*_Social Security account to opt out by changing your preferences in the Message Center. You can update your preferences to opt out of the mailed COLA notice, and any other notices that are available online.

Did you know you can receive a text or email alert when there is a new message waiting for you? That way, you always know when we have something important for you — like your COLA notice.

"Medicare premiums are going down and Social Security benefits are going up in 2023, which will give seniors more peace of mind and breathing room," said Kilolo Kijazaki, Social Security acting commissioner. "This year's substantial Social Security cost-of-living adjustment is the first time in over a decade that Medicare premiums are not rising and shows that we can provide more support to older Americans who count on the benefits they have earned."

January 2023 marks when other changes will happen based on the increase in the national average wage index. For example, the maximum amount of earnings subject to Social Security payroll tax in 2023 will be higher. The retirement earnings test exempt amount will also change in 2023. Visit this fact sheet for more info: **https://www.ssa.gov/news/press/factsheets/colafacts2023.pdf**

Be among the first to know! Sign up for or log in to your personal *my*_Social Security account today. Choose email or text under "Message Center Preferences" to receive courtesy notifications.

You can find more information about the 2023 COLA at **https://www.ssa.gov/cola/**.

Suggest a topic! Email us at
tbiteam@uams.edu

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The IDHI Brain Injury Program offers a disability resource website to connect those with trauma-related disabilites to helpful resources and organizations in the community.

To access the disability resources website, go to:

https://atrp.ar.gov

We also offer a 24-hour nurse call center for people with a brain or spinal cord injury, their caregivers, or medical providers. Call anytime with questions about your health, symptoms, or medical care.

To access the call center, call:

1-855-767-6983



For more information about the disability resource website or the nurse call center, call (501) 295-6576 or email trrp@uams.edu

The nurse call center is a partnership of the UAMS Institute for Digital Health & Innovation and the UAMS Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, and is funded by the Brain Injury Program.

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Brain Injury Program

ARKANSAS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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