

“Let’s Talk About…” is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.

Let’s Talk About Not Talking

Something that’s come up a bit more often for me lately is awareness that words don’t work for everybody in the same way, or all the time, or at all. A 2018 study found that 25 to 30% of autistic children are nonspeaking. Stroke survivors and people with MS, ALS, or other diseases that impact motor neurons may be physically incapable of speech. Trauma can potentially render people incapable of speech for a period of time, maybe minutes but sometimes for years or the rest of a person’s life. So this month, let’s talk about not talking.

The most foundational thing to know is that nonspeaking is a far cry from nonthinking. Stephen Hawking is a well-known example of someone who could not speak but certainly had brilliant ideas to share with the world. While most nonspeakers may not have Hawking’s resources available, a variety of text-to-speech programs are increasingly harnessed to facilitate communication that otherwise might not happen. Younger children, people with limited dexterity or reading capacity, and others who find it helpful might use a communication device with pictures they can tap instead of written words. With all the tools available in our world today, nonspeaking does not have to mean noncommunicating.

How can we support our nonspeaking friends and neighbors?

1. Be patient. A lot of communication devices take some time to get the point across. Especially when someone is learning to use a new technology, a simple statement or question or request may take several minutes to get communicated. Remember that what this person has to say matters just as much as what any speaking person might want to say. Letting someone feel heard, seen, and respected can always have a positive impact.
2. Be flexible. Recognize that the difference between a nonspeaking person’s preferred mode of communication and their least favorite is probably a much more significant gap than the difference between a speaking person’s favorite and least favorite mode of communication. If you prefer phone calls but your nonspeaking friend communicates best through texting (or emojis), try to work with what works for them.
3. Be respectful. Communication is the greatest superpower people can have, and nonspeaking people have worked hard to find ways to connect with the world. Remember their ability to speak or not has no bearing on their intelligence, emotional capacity, or anything else—besides how they communicate.

And don’t take it from me! Check out the multitude of nonspeaking bloggers and other public figures on this resource page: <https://neuroclastic.com/directory-of-nonspeaker-pages-blogs-media/>

Our “Let’s Talk About…” column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you’d like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJGLgVagbDZ9> or email me directly at virginiag@smokyhillumc.org.