



# FREE SPEECH

## Lamar University clinic offers free therapy for speech, language issues

For people who have had a stroke, their speech and language abilities before and after the event can be as different as night and day, especially for people who develop aphasia.

Aphasia is a language impairment that occurs due to a neurological injury, usually a stroke, explains Lamar University Department of Speech and Hearing professor Dr. Jamie Azios, an aphasiologist who works with patients visiting the campus's free Speech Language Pathology Clinic.

"Aphasia affects one's ability to understand language, to use language, to read and to write. It impacts any modality of language. Importantly, it doesn't affect one's cognition, or thinking, so it doesn't affect their intelligence. They know what they want to say and they understand, but they can't get it out," she described. "It's usually the 'tip of the tongue' effect. You know what you want to say, but you can't quite get it out, or you may misinterpret or misunderstand something someone else says. You may hear the word 'cat,' but your brain tells you 'dog.' It's like word-switching."

According to the National Aphasia Association (NAA), the most common cause of aphasia is stroke, and the organization estimates about 25-40% of stroke survivors acquire aphasia. It can



Dr. Jamie Azios

also result from head injury, brain tumor or other neurological causes. Aphasia affects about 2 million Americans and is more common than Parkinson's disease, cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy. Though nearly 180,000 Americans acquire the disorder each year, NAA reports, most people have never even heard of it.

Because most people have never heard of aphasia, suggests Azios, they may not be sensitive to someone suffering from the disorder.

"It can cause people to appear 'funny' to people who don't really understand

the condition, so there's a lot of social isolation because you may feel awkward," said Azios. "You can imagine what some people go through. Things like depression and social isolation are much higher in people with aphasia due to stroke than a person who has a stroke and doesn't have aphasia. It's really a social disability."

Azios and other LU instructors research new treatments and teach graduate students working at the clinic how to treat and manage various speech and language conditions, such as aphasia. At the clinic, treatments for aphasia "are focused on more social activities and engagement in life," Azios explained.

"We run conversation groups where people with aphasia get together with one of our graduate student clinicians to help them communicate in a group conversation setting," she described. "We have a book club just for people with aphasia. Some people have problems reading because of the word-switching, and some had stopped reading altogether before their treatment and the book club."

"We have a technology group. After a stroke, texting can be very hard, or getting on Facebook. You use technology for everything in your life. One lady who could no longer drive after her stroke learned how to use Uber, so now she has more independence. Those are the types

of things that we do.

“We currently have 10 people with aphasia that come every semester that participate.”

Without the free services available at LU, Azios says some, if not all, of those participants could quickly run out of options for treating the lifelong condition.

“Those people from the community who have had a stroke and have aphasia, they run out of health care dollars very quickly,” she said. “We have good relationships with the local hospitals and rehab centers, so when they see an end in the ability for these patients to receive services, they refer them to our clinic. Aphasia is really the type of disorder for which people need treatment forever, so there’s a big gap that we can come in and fill.”

“Jamie is in her fifth year and is an aphasiologist, so she’s made a profound impact in opportunities for students to learn how to manage individuals with aphasia and community efforts,” said Dr. Monica Bellon-Harn, who is chair of the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences at LU and faculty at the Speech Language Pathology Clinic. “We changed to a free clinic about three years ago. Having the free clinic really opened up the opportunity for us to accept as many people with aphasia who walk through our door. Students and faculty work with the clients, and the clients are people from the community.

“By moving to a free clinic, we have really been able to open up the services we offer and the experience of our students, so that when they go out and work as professional speech pathologists they have both a breadth and depth of experiences to bring to the community. We have a graduate program in Speech Language Pathology, so students are required to complete 400 clock hours under the supervision of faculty, like Jamie.”

“We also see people for many other conditions,” Harn continued. “We’re really a unique program in the nation in that we have PhD faculty in all scope of practice areas in speech pathology, or the majority of scopes. What that does is it allows specialized training for students in aphasia, in stuttering, dementia, voice, child speech and language disorders. The faculty do research that looks at the therapy, and that shapes the outcomes of the clients.”

Clinic faculty also look at innovative ways to address gaps in service delivery



**Dr. Monica Bellon-Harn**

that could occur for a number of reasons, like insurance, transportation, living in a more rural area and not being able to get to the clinic and working families, Harn described. According to her, “There are a lot of things that impact why somebody might not be able to physically come to the clinic to get the services they need in whatever scope of practice area that is.”

To reach the people who want and need the clinic’s services but are not able to get to the facility, LU President Ken Evans started the Presidential Visionary Initiative three years ago, said Harn.

“We applied to develop a center for digital applications in health and disability,” she described. “What that has done is, everybody who is actively engaged in looking at treatment research has been able to develop online supplemental interventions.”

For example, Harn explained, Azios leads a supplemental intervention called Conversation Connection to assist caregivers of people with aphasia. Harn and Dr. Lekeitha Morris created Success with Stories, a supplemental parent training program for families to learn skills to help with storybook reading and pre-literacy in the home.

“Dr. Morris leads the program,” said Harn. “She goes to the libraries with students to support families who are at risk for impairment and to help identify children who may have some impairment but the parents are unaware to get some early intervention to the family.

“We also run a program for school-aged kids – a neurodiversity theater program at Beaumont Community Players. We have College Connect, which is

a college prep program for students with autism or other developmental disabilities. We have iVoice, which is for vocal pathology prevention. And, we have a dementia program to teach CNAs (certified nursing assistants) continuing education for how to manage people with dementia. We’re in our fourth year of that, and we’re starting to get the results of some of our pre-pilot tests of this intervention. We think it’s going to have a big impact on the discipline.”

Partnerships with numerous community groups, local schools and medical providers allow clinic faculty and student clinicians to share treatment strategies with caregivers and they bring awareness to little known conditions, such as aphasia.

“Kate Dishman has been awesome and has partnered with us to raise awareness of the diagnosis of aphasia,” said Azios. “One of the big gaps in treatment is when people are first diagnosed with aphasia. It kind of gets lost. We had somebody come to the clinic who had a stroke eight years ago and didn’t know that he had aphasia. He didn’t have a word for his condition. There is just not a big awareness of it.

“People with aphasia who come to our program actually go visit people at Dishman who have been recently diagnosed to share their stories and give hope about what recovery might look like. They provide paper resources that patients can look at and reference later, and they let the patients know what resources we have available in the community.”

“Southeast Texas is a special place to be,” Harn added. “People just open their doors to us, and we’ve learned a lot from all of the people in the community that we have collaborated with.”

The clinic offers a wide array of services in Pediatric Speech and Language Therapy and

Adult Speech and Language disorder treatment, including therapy in stuttering and accent management. To learn more about LU’s Speech Language Pathology Clinic, visit the website at [www.lamar.edu/fine-arts-communication/speech-and-hearing-sciences/speech-language-path-clinic/index.html](http://www.lamar.edu/fine-arts-communication/speech-and-hearing-sciences/speech-language-path-clinic/index.html), call (409) 880-8171 or stop by the clinic on campus at Lamar University, Department of Speech & Hearing Sciences, on the corner of Rolfe Christopher and Iowa in Beaumont.

– Sharon Brooks