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Word Retrieval Difficulties

Almost all people have experienced a “tip of the tongue” moment when coming up with a desired word was extremely difficult or maybe even impossible at the very moment the word was needed. In the most classic sense, a word retrieval problem represents temporary difficulty gaining access to or retrieve a known and understood word. Word retrieval difficulties, also referred to as word finding difficulties or dysnomia, occur in people of all ages. When the frequency of the problem is more than that of the occasional “tip of the tongue” moment, the ability to fully and coherently express one’s thoughts can be diminished.

A person with word retrieval difficulties may display some of the following tendencies: substitutions of a targeted word that may be similar in regards to word class or sound structure (i.e. fruit for apple, water for juice, hammer for tool, pellet for pelican), circumlocutions whereby the person “talks around the word,” descriptions of the target word (i.e. “you eat soup with it,” for a spoon), use of time fillers like “um,” use of vague words or pronouns (stuff or thing), self-correction, the use of gestures to replace a target word or to supplement vague language. These are some of the most common characteristics seen with word retrieval difficulties.

These difficulties are thought to be associated with storage, retrieval, or a combination of both. Difficulties with storage can be related to storage of the word meaning or storage of the phonological representation of the word. Likewise, difficulties with retrieval can be related to retrieval of the word meaning or retrieval of the phonological representation of the word. Thus, German (1994) delineates three basic groups of people who demonstrate word-finding errors: people who fit the classic definition of word retrieval difficulties due to sufficiently stored knowledge of both word meaning and phonological representation of words, yet cannot access one or both of these components; people who have difficulty *storing* word meanings or phonological representations in a sufficiently comprehensive manner which may be linked to overall comprehension difficulties; and, people who present with both storage and retrieval difficulties. The first group would benefit most from learning word retrieval strategies, the second group would likely require work with

underlying vocabulary and phonological deficits, and the third group would need a combination of intervention techniques.

Several remediation strategies exist and choice of intervention techniques is based not only on the subtype of the person as described above, but also on other characteristics such as speed and accuracy of retrieval. For instance, a person who is a fast but inaccurate retriever of words might receive instruction in reflective pausing techniques whereas a person who is slow and inaccurate may receive more instruction of cueing strategies or synonym substitutions. A comprehensive intervention program addresses not only remediation techniques but also self-advocacy and compensatory modifications. For example, a person must develop self-awareness of their vulnerabilities in order to advocate for themselves.

Assessment of a person for word retrieval difficulties would include both formal and informal assessment procedures. A person's ability to retrieve words may be differentially affected by the context of the task and even by settings, which a person perceives to be more or less stressful. Diagnosis of word retrieval difficulties is typically made by a certified speech-language-pathologist or a psychologist, neuropsychologist, or a neurologist as part of a more comprehensive exam.

Word retrieval difficulties can be extremely frustrating for someone as it can affect overall expression of ideas, demonstration of true knowledge, and even fluency of speech. Learning word retrieval strategies and consistent practice in retrieving accurately and efficiently can improve word retrieval abilities. Please contact a certified speech-language-pathologist with any concerns regarding word retrieval skills or other areas of speech and language.

Source: Center for Speech and Language Pathology