

Addressing the communication demands of virtual meetings and court appearances

Most of us prefer to talk kanohi ki te kanohi/face to face, but for some people and some situations, a phone or virtual conversation might work well. However, some people might struggle to understand and fully participate in phone or virtual interactions. These interactions might be particularly challenging if the person has speech, language and/or communication needs, or when the interaction involves high-stakes discussion. Sustained virtual interaction can be tiring for all.

Phone/virtual interaction can bring challenges for both the Speaker and the Listener. It can be even more challenging when the interaction involves several people. For example:

The Speaker can't always detect:

- when the Listener has been distracted by something, or when they look confused, or when the technology may have failed to keep the connection.
- when the effort of listening, processing information and thinking is becoming overwhelming or causing fatigue for the Listener.
- when the Listener has something they want to say



The Listener may find it more difficult to:

- listen carefully and focus (without something concrete to focus on)
- hear the conversation clearly (some people have hearing loss that they might not be aware of)
- process and remember a lot of the words/language without the visual or contextual cues they normally get from the Speaker or others (facial expression, gesture)
- notice when they have missed information, or misunderstood something
- tell the Speaker that they want to give their views or ask a question, say if they are confused, need information to be repeated, or when there is a technical issue.



Before you involve a person/whānau in a virtual or phone high-stakes conversation think about:

- How easy or difficult it is for them to do the things above?
- Is it realistic for this person to participate effectively?
- How will family/whānau or others be involved?
- What needs to be in place to make the interaction more successful?

Consider the ideas on the following pages. If a Communication Assistant is already involved, they can give bespoke advice.

Planning for important phone calls and virtual appearances

Before virtual meetings and court appearances

First, ask yourself.... **“Is having high-stakes interaction virtually or over the phone the right decision for this particular person/whānau?”**

Other things to think about

Technology

- What access do you and the other person have to technology, equipment (webcam, headphones, mic, internet)?
- Have they used anything like this before? How confident and capable are they to set up and use this technology?
- Is there anyone to help them get set up, or help if there are problems?
- If video conferencing (rather than phone), jpegs, or audio files would help to make important messages make sense, is there anything you can do to make this possible (and affordable) for the person/whānau (in advance or during proceedings)?
- Would it be useful to review the material we've designed for participants to help them get ready?



Environment

- Will you and the person/whānau be able to find quiet spaces so that you can all hear easily, not be interrupted, and maintain confidentiality?
- Will it be possible for you and the person/whānau to minimise distractions during the phone call?
- Is there anyone else who needs to be involved, or who can support the person/whānau during the phone call? Will they be in the same place or do you need a 3-way call? What technology do they need or have access to? Do they understand the boundaries of their role?



Language

- Will you have the conversation in the first language of the person/whānau?
- If not, have you organised an interpreter?
- How will the interpreter join the interaction remotely?



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Before virtual meetings and court appearances

Plan your communication approach carefully:

- Identify the key things that need to be talked about.
- Choose the words, and sentences you are going to use for each topic to make sure that you **reduce the amount** of:
 - language the person/whānau has to process
 - concentrating and listening the person/whānau has to do
- Identify information you can provide the person/whānau in advance by text (depending on literacy), voicemail message, video message so they:
 - can prepare themselves
 - can orient themselves to the topics during the interaction
- Have realistic expectations about what can be discussed or achieved.
- Don't assume that the person/whānau will be able to synthesise the information that you are providing verbally on the spot.

Synthesise =
understand AND 'weigh up'
the information AND work
out what it means for them

The things we need to talk about/decide are...
1)
2)
3)

Break it down

"You are charged with Possession of Instruments for Conversion."

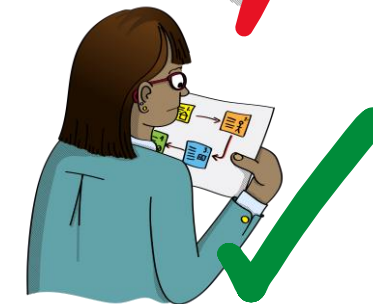
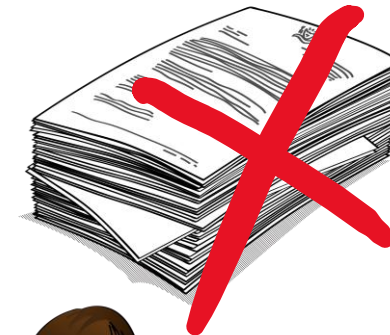
Charge

Possession of Instruments for Conversion
Charge = what the Police say you did
You had things to use for stealing a car

Look out for jargon

Explain it

What words might be confusing?
Write down the jargon word or phrase if you need to use it
Explain it simply
Draw it
If it is important, make sure you check it now makes sense



Learning from telehealth experience and those who have been developing practices in legal settings

- Telehealth has been developing rapidly in the last decade and there is much to learn from health practitioners about how to enable people to participate in high-stakes virtual interactions.
 - <https://www.racp.edu.au/pomegranate/view/ep57-the-art-of-telehealth>
 - <https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/telehealth-guidelines-and-practical-tips.pdf>
 - <https://speechtherapy.org.nz/info-for-slts/information-regarding-covid-19/>
- Legal practitioners have also been writing about their recent experiences
 - <https://twitter.com/TringLawyer/status/1250136671129133059>

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Think about **communication breakdown strategies**

These are strategies that help the person/whānau know what to do if the conversation gets too challenging for them. This might happen when the person/whānau miss an important bit of information, there is too much information, they get distracted, the environment is too noisy, the phone or internet connection is poor or drops completely, etc.

Remind the person/whānau to:

Tell me if:

- I am going too fast
- I am saying too much
- I don't make sense
- I need to say it in a different way
- You need a break

How will they get your attention to let you know there is a problem?

If the connection fails, or they can't hear or see, what must they do, and what will you do?

Remind the person/whānau that it is better to speak up and ask clarification rather than to guess or be confused e.g.

“It might be difficult to hear sometimes, or work out who is talking. If you need anyone to repeat something, just say “ Say it again please”

Be aware that many people are not used to speaking up and may not do so (even if this is encouraged), especially in formal or unfamiliar settings.

Ask questions

Let someone know they can say

Please say that

- Again
- More slowly
- A different way

I'm confused.
What does that mean for me?
What do I have to do?
What is happening next?

I need a break

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During virtual meetings and court appearances

Signpost topics

Be really clear when you start and finish talking about a topic



Check comprehension effectively

Your interaction only counts if everyone involved can understand it.

Respectfully check the listener's understanding regularly throughout the conversation. The grey box gives examples of questions that effectively check comprehension. Just asking, "Do you understand?" or "Did you understand all that?" is usually a waste of time.

"I'm not sure if I said that clearly. What did that mean to you?"

"So tell me, what do you need to do?"

"What's the important thing you need to remember?"

Slow down and say less

Give the person/whānau time to process and to think about what has been said.



Offer breaks

Many people won't take an offered break if they think they are going to hold things up. You may need to schedule short breaks and carefully monitor how the person is managing. Breaks for checking comprehension will be needed in addition to breaks for resting.



Emphasise key words and information



Recap

At the end of the interaction, ask the person/whānau to tell you the important things from your discussion. If they can't do this themselves, you can recap the key points for them. Make sure that they understand what is going to happen next – what *you* need to do and what *they* need to do.

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After virtual meetings and court appearances


Provide a visual summary

A visual summary of the conversation, and of any choices or decisions can be provided by text, by photo, doodle, audio, video depending on the technology available. Make sure accessing whatever you set up will be affordable for them (consider costs involved in accessing or downloading data). What apps does this person already use? Are they secure and safe for this purpose? Again, make sure that the person/whānau understand what is going to happen next – what you need to do and what they need to do.

My Rules


⊗ if you **break the rules** you are in trouble the Police will tell Court

✔ keep the rules and finish your plan


You have to live at 


Your curfew at

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Stay home							
Go out							
Stay home							

You can hang out with 


You are **NOT** allowed to have alcohol


You are **NOT** allowed to go in any place that sells alcohol 

You can go in supermarkets 

You are **NOT** allowed to take any drugs

- NO smoking drugs
- NO eating drugs
- NO injecting drugs

You can take medicine from the **doctor** or the **pharmacy** 


NO violence 

NO threats

NO fighting

Remember to consider everyone's literacy skills. You may need to avoid sending written information. A voicemail message or brief video recapping the important information might be better (as long as the person/whānau can afford to access them on a phone or computer).

Other examples of visual summaries



I'll find out the best person to help you with this stuff.

I'll phone you tomorrow to let you know



District Court

Next date: 5th Feb

Ask for youth court reports + information

Do District court Judge + lawyers know all about you?

Communication Assistant - Mark or Sally will help

Sentence Indication - is it fair for you?

What place is right for you?

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Before virtual meetings and court appearances

Managing fatigue and healthy voice use

Many of us who are spending our days working virtually are becoming aware of the implications on our health and well-being. We know that it is important to manage our fatigue and voice carefully.

Voice issues can escalate. People who use their voices a lot need to consider how to prevent issues which may require long-term therapy or medical interventions.

Participating in back to back virtual meetings, concentrating on a screen for hours without moving around, missing out on the periods of quiet or silence that usually come with moving between meetings or even to and from work, all take their toll on our well-being. This might show up in the way our voice sounds and on our levels of fatigue.

For information about how voice is produced

<https://theconversation.com/explainer-why-the-human-voice-is-so-versatile-69800>

Interesting article from the BBC about zoom and fatigue

<https://bbc.in/2KD7oPD>

Specialist speech-language therapists who are experts in voice care and disorders have compiled useful tips and information.

<https://www.rcslt.org/-/media/Project/RCSLT/rcslt-voice-care-factsheet.pdf>

<https://twitter.com/abracabadger/status/1253627347263279104>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6chOpmAYO74>

https://twitter.com/SLT_DG/status/1254467542736932864/photo/1

<https://bit.ly/2xWrWjw>

VOICE CARE

Posture, muscle tension, and the way you breathe all affect your ability to sustain good quality voice. So....

- Stay hydrated, drink plenty of water.
- Breathe properly (diaphragmatic breathing - breathe from your belly whilst keeping your shoulders down and relaxed)
- Relax your body, particularly the muscles in your shoulders, neck and face.
- Consider posture, seating and work-space set up.
<https://bit.ly/3aM1JBo>
- A microphone can help people who tend to talk more loudly than necessary.
- Take breaks. Have periods of quiet. Intentionally relax.
- Avoid whispering, straining or continuing if your voice starts to fade or become hoarse or croaky. Seek advice.

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