

Speech-language pathologists assess and treat communication and swallowing disorders.

Communication impairments and dysphagia (swallowing disorders) are common in the end-of-life population. These issues contribute to poor social and emotional health and often cause distressing symptoms. Speech-language pathologists play a critical role in all stages of end-of-life care.

The role of the speech-language pathologist includes:

Identifying Symptoms of Terminal Illness

Communication and swallowing symptoms may be indicators of the presence or progression of terminal disease.

Providing Therapy

Rehabilitative treatment may be appropriate to maximize swallowing and communication function for as long as possible.

Educating and Counselling

Speech-language pathologists reduce caregiver burden and stress by educating and counselling caregivers and patients regarding communication and swallowing changes.

Increasing Comprehension

Speech-language pathologists support participation in decision-making by helping patients understand medical information, such as treatment risks and benefits.

Enabling Self-Expression

Optimizing communication skills ensures that patients maintain autonomy and a sense of control throughout their illness. Being able to communicate also promotes inter-personal communication and fulfillment of end-of-life goals.

Maintaining a Sense of Self

By offering alternative communication strategies, speech-language pathologists help patients who can no longer communicate verbally maintain a sense of who they are. One example is voice banking, where the person digitally records their voice to be inputted into their speech-generating device.

Recommending Comfort Feeding

Speech-language pathologists contribute to comfort care by offering alternatives to artificial hydration and nutrition for patients who are no longer able to eat and drink safely.