



# Mid-Atlantic Aphasia Conference Newsletter

[www.midatlanticaphasiaconference.org](http://www.midatlanticaphasiaconference.org)

Volume #3

Issue #1



January 1, 2026

## From The Editor's Desk:

### Welcome to the New Year and New Possibilities!

Happy New Year my friends, and welcome to a new year full of great possibilities for us!

Aphasia may affect how our words come out or how we understand, but *it does not erase our ideas, our plans, our thoughts, our goals, or our value!*

The possibilities ahead of us do not mean that we can only have them if we do things perfectly. Let's consider this...

A productive year can mean:

- ☐ Taking small steps, at our own pace
- ☐ Trying a new way to communicate
- ☐ Joining a group activity
- ☐ Practicing a skill
- ☐ Continuing in support groups, just show up!

Did you know that simply showing up for your groups is progress?! Every effort counts. Progress can be quiet, slow, and can still be very REAL!

This year, let us take the time we need to progress and be more productive! Let us...

- ☐ Ask for the help we need
- ☐ Use tools to support us
- ☐ Celebrate what we can do, not just what feels difficult

Productivity can look like learning, connecting with others, resting when needed, and sharing your voice in new ways!

We, at MAAC are here to support you, listen to you, and grow with you. We look forward to share conversations, laughter, learning, and encouragement together in the year ahead.

We trust you have a year filled with patience, confidence, connection, and hope!

**Denise Mendez**

## NEED A PAMPHLET?

**Mark Harder**, President-Mid-Atlantic Aphasia Conference

Do you go to the pizza place?

Do you go to any doctor's offices?

Do you go to the pharmacy?

Do you go the grocery store?

Do you know that we can advocate for people with aphasia everywhere we go?

Bring a few pamphlets and ask your doctor, nurse, pharmacist, or even the pizza shop owner to put it on the table or on the cork board.

We are not asking for money. It is all about **aphasia awareness**.

**MAAC has delivered hundreds of pamphlets to community stores, libraries, doctor offices, and more.**

Contact Mark Harder at [msharder.maac@gmail.com](mailto:msharder.maac@gmail.com) or print the double-sided PDF document, <https://midatlanticaphasiaconference.org/brochures-for-aphasia>



**GET THE WORD OUT!! APHASIA!!**

## New To MAAC?

Welcome to the Mid-Atlantic Aphasia Conference!

You are invited to join our  
**Support Group Sessions**  
Every 2<sup>nd</sup> Monday at 7pm ET  
&  
**Conversation Group Sessions**  
Every 4<sup>th</sup> Monday at 7pm ET

Scan the QR code and subscribe to get our emails and to see our website with other events, resources, and photos!





## PAWS to PAUSE

**Tie:** Are you a little stressed?

**Me:** I am not the one that is barking.

**Tie:** I was just getting your attention. You were growling.

**Me:** I guess I was a little stressed with my speech.

**Tie:** Do you know that taking a “pause” can give your brain time to retrieve your words. It’s like, you lost your keys. It’s familiar, it’s close, it’s on the tip of your tongue.

**Me:** You are right, Tie. I should **stop, take a break,** and **reset.** It may give me the time to either find the word or use a similar word. **Be patient with myself!**

**Tie:** See... Isn’t that better?

...And I did have your keys.

1 Minute Aphasia Tips: Embrace the Pause - <https://youtu.be/IzMuph0sD-M>

Just a Minute - <https://www.jamcard.org>



## THE POWER OF PEER SUPPORT

### **You Are Not Alone: The Power of Peer Support**

Recovery after a stroke or other neurologic condition is not simple.

It does not happen all at once. There are good days. There are hard days.

Many people living with aphasia or other neurologic conditions face daily challenges.

These challenges can affect movement, speech, thinking, emotions, and confidence.

Families and caregivers also feel the stress and uncertainty that come with these changes.

One kind of support is making a big difference: **peer mentoring**.

### **What Is Peer Mentoring?**

Peer mentoring means talking one-to-one with someone who has lived through a similar experience.

A peer mentor is not a doctor or therapist but is someone who understands because they have “been there.”

This shared experience builds trust.

It helps people feel seen, heard, and understood.

### **Why Peer Mentoring Helps**

Peer mentors listen. They share real stories. They offer practical tips for daily life.

Many people feel more comfortable asking personal questions in a one-to-one conversation.

Talking with someone who truly understands can make difficult topics easier to discuss.

Peer mentoring helps people:

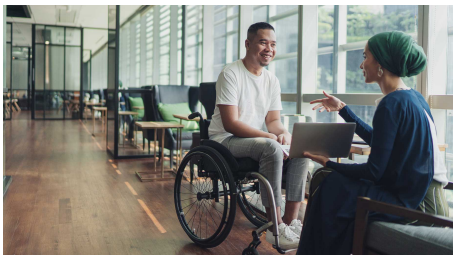
- Feel less alone
- Feel more confident
- Feel more hopeful

### **Support After Leaving the Hospital**

The time after leaving the hospital can be overwhelming.

Many people feel unsure about what comes next.

Peer mentors can help during this time—and long after.



They may help with:

- Adjusting to daily routines
- Staying motivated for therapy
- Managing emotions and fatigue
- Communicating with doctors

Peer mentoring acts as a bridge during recovery.

### **Help for Caregivers Too**

Caregivers need support as well.

Peer mentoring helps caregivers:

- Feel less isolated
- Learn from others who understand
- Gain confidence in their role

Talking with another caregiver can reduce stress and fear.

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## THE POWER OF PEER SUPPORT

### Emotional and Health Benefits

Research shows peer mentoring can:

- Reduce anxiety and depression
- Improve mood and outlook
- Increase participation in therapy
- Improve quality of life

Seeing someone who has adapted to change shows that a meaningful life is still possible. Many people describe this as learning to accept a “new normal.”

### A Message of Hope

Peer mentoring reminds us of something important: Recovery is a process.

Adaptation takes time.

And no one should have to do it alone. **Sometimes**, the most powerful words are simply, **“I understand”**.

### Want to Learn More?

If you are interested in peer mentoring, ask:

- Your neurologist
- Your rehabilitation team
- Your clinic or hospital

Support is out there—and it can make a real difference.

To read the entire article:

<https://www.brainandlife.org/articles/peer-mentors-help-patients-navigate-life-neurologic-disease>

**IN JANUARY 2026,  
MAAC LEADERS  
WILL START TRAINING AS  
PEER HEALTH MENTORS!**

## ***Happy New Year Around the World!***

**There are many interesting traditions across the world... let's see how our international friends celebrate the New Year!**

### **Spain – “Feliz Año Nuevo!”**

#### **Eat 12 Grapes**

In Spain the tradition is to eat one grape at each stroke of midnight.

### **Colombia**

#### **Pack Light**

In fact, pack nothing at all. In Colombia, people take empty suitcases and run around the block as fast as they can, right foot first. It's supposed to guarantee a year filled with travel.

### **Puerto Rico**

#### **Throw Water out the Window**

Look out below! In Puerto Rico, it is believed that dumping a bucket of water out the window drives away evil spirits!

### **Portuguese (Brazil) – “Feliz Ano Novo!”**

#### **Jump Seven Waves!**

Spending New Year's Eve on the beach sounds nice in and of itself, but in Brazil it's believed that your luck increases if you get in the surf and jump over seven waves—one for each of the divine spirits of the Umbanda religion. Revelers also get one wish for each wave, which is an added incentive to get in the water.

### **Greece - Bonanza Year - καλή χρονιά**

Pomegranate Smashing: A pomegranate is smashed at the door; more seeds mean more good fortune.





## Healthy Mind, Healthy You!

Are you taking care of  
your WHOLE SELF?

(summarized from [www.ibx.com/good-living/update](http://www.ibx.com/good-living/update))

Dr. Ramos, the IBX Medical Director had a recent article that discussed some essential truths about emotional well-being!

1. Our mental health and emotional well-being is as important as our physical health!

- ☐ The care and attention we give to our physical body, can influence our mental health! Our attitudes, thoughts, and feelings can impact our physical health!

2. By prioritizing mental health alongside physical health, adults can maintain better overall well-being and independence.

3. Daily things we can do to improve our mental health includes:

- ☐ Exercising
- ☐ Maintaining social connections
- ☐ Staying hydrated
- ☐ Eating a balanced diet
- ☐ Having restful sleep
- ☐ Relaxing and recharging

4. Seeking help for emotional or mental needs is a STRENGTH, not a weakness.

5. Take loneliness seriously! CONNECTION is essential to our well-being so it makes sense that loneliness and social isolation can take a serious toll on both physical and mental health.

### How to stay connected...

- ☐ Join a local club
- ☐ Get involved in your community (like MAAC and other aphasia groups)
- ☐ Learn conversation starters to make small talk easier (use strategies from your therapy or support groups)

## Happy New Year Around the World! (Part 2)

### France- "Bonne Année"

The French generally refer to New Year's Eve as **La Saint-Sylvestre**. This is because December 31st is the Western feast day of Saint Sylvester I, who was the Pope from 314-335. His pontificate saw the start of the Christian Roman Empire, and legend has it that he both converted and baptized Emperor Constantine.

### England- "Happy New Year"

First-Footing, where the first person to cross the threshold after midnight (ideally a dark-haired man with gifts like coal or shortbread) brings good fortune

### Scottish – Auld Lang Syne

Singing this traditional Scottish song (meaning "old long since") is a must to **remember old friends** as the new year begins.

### Ireland

Irish New Year traditions focus on banishing bad luck and welcoming prosperity through rituals like opening doors at midnight to let the old year out and the new in.

### Australia

For Australians, New Year's Eve occurs right in the middle of summer – and so naturally, it tends to be celebrated with outdoor activities.

# Embracing my Independence and Nurturing my Well-Being through Traveling

DENISE MENDEZ

Hi! I'm Denise Mendez. I often say, **"I have aphasia, but aphasia doesn't have me!"** This affirmation is both my personal message to self, reminding me that the series of strokes, the craniotomy to remove a bleeding AVM, and the ongoing challenges of chronic aphasia do not define who I am. These experiences will not stop me from thriving and living my best life.

As Ella Fitzgerald famously sang, "Into each life some rain must fall." In 2024, I found myself in the midst of a torrential storm. I was confronted with unanswered health questions, the loss to death of friends and family, and a sense of dissatisfaction as I hit a plateau in my reading and writing rehabilitation. This period left me feeling uncomfortable, less confident, and more stressed than ever before.

So, what did I do? I chose to travel! Traveling has always been a positive force in my life. Before my strokes, I explored the Caribbean, Cuba, South Korea, and much of the United States. With the challenges I was facing, I realized what I needed was more than just a quick getaway—I needed an extended trip, a journey that would present new experiences and challenges.

Since my first stroke in 2017, I had only traveled alone within the United States, navigating Amtrak train stations and domestic airlines—though not without considerable stress and anxiety. After three additional strokes, I was limited to traveling with family and friends, dictated by their vacation schedules. As a retired, disabled woman, **I wanted the freedom to travel on my own terms.** So, I made the decision to travel to France by myself in May 2025, enrolling in a tour group that specializes in solo travel. This trip was transformative—not only because of the landmarks, museums, restaurants, and beautiful vistas, but because I learned so much about myself traveling from Philadelphia to Paris as a person with aphasia.

Traveling can be hectic, but **I was determined to succeed by following proven self-care strategies.** I adhered strictly to my schedule for medications and vitamins. Each morning before our tours, I would walk through the neighborhoods near our hotels, enjoying the simple pleasure of exploring on foot. The days were busy, but I slept well each night and savored some of the best food I have ever tasted. The vegetables were especially fresh and flavorful! I sampled foie gras, though it wasn't to my liking, and I chose not to try escargot—I generally enjoy seafood, but I draw the line at snails. As someone who doesn't enjoy wine, I didn't have to worry about overindulging in vino. Along with eating healthy, staying well-hydrated was a top priority for me.



Denise and her travel group in Paris, France, in front of the Eiffel Tower.







Denise and her travel group at Saint Paul de Vence in the South of France.

As an **aphasia advocate**, I took the opportunity to talk with my tour mates and spread awareness about aphasia. I explained my communication challenges so they would understand if I frequently needed to pull back from socializing. Our group had 28 people, and when environments became overstimulating—like in noisy restaurants or concerts—I would separate myself or use earplugs.

I enjoyed using my senses to savor the sights, scents, tastes, and sounds of France. Aphasia did not prevent me from trying to order in restaurants or make purchases in stores and markets, even though I do not speak French. A **genuine smile** often bridged any language gap. Despite initial concerns, I found that communication difficulties were not emotionally

overwhelming. Instead, I **felt empowered** navigating new situations **independently**. Each accomplishment boosted my confidence as a traveler, communicator, and served as a reminder that I am more than aphasia!

**Traveling solo** gave me many opportunities to engage my mind—planning, scheduling, organizing, and using navigation or museum apps. Although I didn't read any books during the trip, (but was able to find a English written French cookbook!), I read signs and labels on exhibits and artifacts. The art, history, and local culture provided rich cognitive enrichment.

**I have aphasia,  
but aphasia doesn't  
have me!**

My solo trip to France was incredibly encouraging for my **self-esteem** and **confidence** as an independent person. I returned home fully aware of my **strength** and **resilience**. I now plan to return to France with friends so I can share the joy and wonder of the country with others.

**I hope my story inspires others with aphasia to pursue their independence and embrace the possibilities that travel can bring.**

### ***Happy New Year Around the World! (Part 3)***

#### **Philippines – “Maligayang Bagong Taon”**

##### **Dot It Up**

It's not just what you eat on New Year's Eve that can attract prosperity—what you wear play a role, too, at least according to tradition in the Philippines.

#### **Japan - あけましておめでとう (Akemashite Omedetō)**

**Eat Long Foods-** In Japan, it's traditional to eat "toshikoshi soba," a dish with buckwheat noodles that's served hot or cold. The long noodles symbolize longevity, and the hearty buckwheat plant represents resilience

#### **Russia - с Новым Годом (s Novym Godom)**

##### **Spice Up the Champagne!**

In Russia, Champagne gets an extra ingredient on New Year's: Revelers write a wish down on a piece of paper, burn it and add the ashes to the drink. It all has to be done before the first and last stroke of midnight, too. **Bottoms up!**

- <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/parenting/g25360543/new-year-traditions/>



MAAC QUARTERLY SCHEDULE/CALENDAR
January, February, March 2026

Date	Session	Topic/Guest
Monday, Jan. 12 <sup>th</sup> 7pm ET	<b>MAAC Support Group</b> For people with aphasia and caregivers/care partners <b>On Zoom</b>	<b>Special Guest:</b> <b>Kirsten Klug</b>
Monday, Jan. 26 <sup>th</sup> 7pm ET	<b>MAAC CONVERSATION GROUP</b> Join Us! <b>WORD Stim with Ayana Webb</b>	
Thursday, February 5 <sup>th</sup> 12 noon ET	<div>  </div> <b>Quarterly MAAC Abroad!</b> <b>Special Guest: Mike Kent</b> “Empowering Disability”	
Monday, Feb. 9 <sup>th</sup> 7pm ET	<b>MAAC Support Group</b> For people with aphasia and caregivers/care partners <b>On Zoom</b>	<b>Special Guest:</b> <b>Matt Weingartner</b>
Monday, Feb. 23 <sup>rd</sup> 7pm ET	<b>MAAC CONVERSATION GROUP</b> Join Us! Topic: to be announced	
Monday, Mar. 9 <sup>th</sup> 7pm ET	<b>MAAC Support Group</b> For people with aphasia and caregivers/care partners <b>On Zoom</b>	<b>Special Guest:</b> <b>Kimberly Jones</b>
Saturday, March 21 <sup>st</sup> 10am-3pm ET	<b>In-Person MAAC MINI-Conference</b> <b>Key Speaker: Alexander Pfister, MD</b> Neurologist and Co-Director of Casual Fifth Performance Ensemble Bristol Township Park & Rec Building	
Monday, Mar. 23 <sup>rd</sup> 7pm ET	<b>MAAC CONVERSATION GROUP</b> Join Us! Topic: to be announced	

