



10 Communication Tips for Dementia Caregivers

INTRODUCTION

Communication—the expressive or receptive exchange of information—is vital to the functional success and emotional well-being of a person with dementia.

Yet difficulty expressing needs and/or understanding another person is common when someone has Alzheimer’s disease or another form of dementia. And communication breakdowns can be extremely stressful for both the person with dementia and the caregiver. They can also contribute significantly to excess disability.

But you have the power to communicate effectively with someone who has dementia—throughout every stage of their disease—by adapting your communication style.

Expressive communication involves expressing one’s needs and thoughts through speech, body language, facial expressions, etc.

Receptive communication involves understanding the communications of others, through their speech, body language, facial expressions, etc.

A person-centered approach that's grounded in dignity and respect is a key to communicating effectively with a person who has dementia.

ADAPTING YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE

Never underestimate the powerful impact you have on someone you provide care for. As a care partner, you are the most important tool for facilitating a positive experience—for the person and for you.

When it comes to communicating with someone who has dementia, ask yourself:

“How can I adapt to this person, instead of them adapting to me?”

Use the tips on the following pages to adapt your communication style, and you'll help improve the person's function, emotional well-being, and quality of life.



TIP 1: Gain Attention and Trust.

Before you speak, make sure you have gained the person's attention.

It's also important that the person in your care feels safe with you and that you have his or her agreement and approval to proceed.

EXAMPLES

"Ed, is your daughter coming to see you today?"

"Good morning, Betty. It's time to go to breakfast."

"Les, would you like to take a walk?"





TIP 2: Approach From the Front

Always try to approach a person with dementia from the front so he or she has an opportunity to recognize you. Keep in mind too that in the later stages of dementia, the person's range of vision may become more limited, so you may need to make further adaptations.

Before speaking, make direct eye contact (unless it's culturally unacceptable) and stand or sit in front of the person so that you're at their eye level. Maintaining eye contact during the conversation helps show that you're listening. It also builds trust, promotes respect, and lets the person know that you care about them.



EXAMPLES

"Frances, can I take your sweater to the laundry?"

"Mr. Ferris, can you turn the volume down on your radio?"

"Helen, let's put these magazines away until after lunch."

TIP 3: Minimize Distractions

People who live with dementia are often easily distracted by both sights and sounds.

Before communicating, try to eliminate all unnecessary sources of stimulation.

If you need to handle someone's personal belongings, be sure to ask his or her permission first.



TIP 4: Lead With the Person's Name

Calling a person with dementia by their name shows respect, and identifying yourself often helps the person with orientation.

Leading with the person's name will also catch their attention, improving their ability to attend to your question or request.

EXAMPLES

"Hi Mrs. Turner, I'm Carrie. Are you ready to play cards?"

"Good morning, Ethel. You have a visitor coming today, don't you?"

"George, it's Becky. How are you feeling today?"



EXAMPLES

"Marvin, when did **Arlene** leave?" (not "she")

"Caroline, can you put **your shirt** in the basket?" (not "it")

"Tony, let's give the books back to **Jerry and Allen.**" (not "them")

TIP 5: Avoid Pronouns

Referring to a book as "it" or to a person's son as "he" can seem logical to someone who does not have a cognitive disability. But for someone who has dementia, pronouns can often frustrate and confuse. What is "it," and who is "he"?

To be clear, speak clearly. Use simple sentences, and avoid words like *it, he, his, she, her, them, they, those, etc.* as much as possible.

TIP 6: Use Short Sentences

Long sentences filled with lots of information can be confusing to someone with dementia. A sentence like "Turn the water on and wash your face because your daughter is coming to see you this afternoon and we want you to be freshened up before her visit" will most likely not be fully understood.

Keep your sentences short and to the point.

EXAMPLES

"Bob, your son will be here soon."

"Mr. Gibson, turn on the water."

"Barbara, use the towel."



TIP 7: Wait for a Response.

Research shows that response time for a person with dementia can be delayed by up to 30 seconds.

For you as a caregiver, this delay might be frustrating sometimes. It's also easy to misinterpret a delay as the person's inability to comprehend your message.

When communicating with someone who has dementia, allow time for them to process your words. During processing, do not distract the person. Be patient and you will often receive the response you might otherwise have missed.





TIP 8: Use Visual or Tactile Cues

Words alone may not be enough to convey the meaning of your message. This can lead to a lack of response and the conclusion that the person cannot or will not do what you're asking.

Use visual demonstrations and tactile/hands-on cues to illustrate your words.

EXAMPLES

While saying "Please brush your hair," demonstrate the movement of hair brushing.

While saying "Raise your arm," raise your arm to demonstrate.

While saying "It's time to eat," put your hand to your mouth to simulate eating.



TIP 9: Watch Your Nonverbal Messages

A key aspect of communication is nonverbal. In addition to the words you use, your tone of voice, volume, body language, and facial expressions also send a message every time you speak.

Nonverbal messages can be both intentional and unintentional, so be careful not to change the meaning of your message with your nonverbal cues.

EXAMPLES

Keep your volume at a normal level (unless the person is hard of hearing).

Avoid crossing your arms, as this can indicate impatience or tension.

Remember that a smile is often contagious.

TIP 10: Be Patient, Supportive, and Friendly

At every stage of dementia, there is a person behind the patient.

When it comes to how someone with dementia communicates, let them know that they have your full attention. Focus on the feelings related to their communication, not just the facts.

Whenever possible and appropriate, use additional forms of communication

to express support, such as touches and smiles.

Remember that good communication brings rewards to both the sender and the receiver.



Ten Tips for Communicating with a Person with Dementia

Caring for a person with dementia poses many challenges for families and caregivers. People with dementia from conditions such as Alzheimer's and related diseases have a progressive *brain* disorder that makes it more and more difficult for them to remember things, think clearly, communicate with others, or take care of themselves. In addition, dementia can cause mood swings and even change a person's personality and behavior. This fact sheet provides some practical strategies for dealing with the troubling behavior problems and communication difficulties often encountered when caring for a person with dementia.

Improving your communication skills will help make caregiving less stressful and will likely improve the quality of your relationship with your consumer. Good communication skills will also enhance your ability to handle the difficult behavior you may encounter as you care for a person with a dementing illness.

1. **Set a positive mood for interaction.** Your attitude and body language communicate your feelings and thoughts stronger than your words. Set a positive mood by speaking to your consumer in a pleasant and respectful manner. Use facial expressions, tone of voice, and physical touch when appropriate to help convey your message and show your feelings of affection.
2. **Get the person's attention.** Limit distractions and noise – turn off the radio or TV, close the curtains or shut the door, or move to quieter surroundings. Before speaking, make sure you have her attention; address her by name, identify yourself by name and relation, and use nonverbal cues and touch to help keep her focused. If she is seated, get down to her level and maintain eye contact.
3. **State your message clearly.** Use simple words and sentences. Speak slowly, distinctly and in a reassuring tone. Refrain from raising your voice higher or louder; instead, pitch your voice lower. If she doesn't understand the first time, use the same wording to repeat your message or question. If she still doesn't understand, wait a few minutes and rephrase the question. Use the names of people and places instead of pronouns or abbreviations.

4. **Ask simple, answerable questions.** Ask one question at a time; those with yes or no answers work best. Refrain from asking open-ended questions or giving too many choices. For example, ask, “*Would you like to wear your white shirt or your blue shirt?*” Better still, show her the choices – visual prompts and cues also help clarify your question and can guide her response.
5. **Listen with your ears, eyes and heart.** Be patient in waiting for your consumer to reply. Watch for nonverbal cues and body language, and respond appropriately. *Always strive to listen for the meaning and feelings that underlie the words.*
6. **Break down activities into a series of steps.** This makes many tasks much more manageable. You can encourage your consumer to do what he can, gently remind him of steps he tends to forget, and assist with steps he’s no longer able to accomplish on his own. Using visual cues, such as showing him with your hand where to place the dinner plate, can be very helpful.
7. **When the going gets tough, distract and redirect.** When your consumer becomes upset, try changing the subject or the environment. For example, ask him for help or suggest going for a walk. *It is important to connect with the person on a feeling level, before you redirect.* You might say, “*I see you’re feeling sad – I’m sorry you’re upset. Let’s go get something to eat.*”
8. **Respond with affection and reassurance.** People with dementia often feel confused, anxious and unsure of themselves. Further, they often get reality confused and may recall things that never really occurred. *Avoid trying to convince them they are wrong.* Stay focused on the feelings they are demonstrating (which are real) and respond with verbal and physical expressions of comfort, support, and reassurance. Sometimes holding hands, touching, hugging and praise will get the person to respond when all else fails.
9. **Remember the good old days.** Remembering the past is often a soothing and affirming activity. Many people with dementia may not remember what happened 45 minutes ago, but they can clearly recall their lives 45 years earlier. Therefore, *avoid asking questions that rely on short-term memory*, such as asking the person what they had for lunch. Instead, try asking general questions about the person’s distant past – this information is more likely to be retained.

10. **Maintain your sense of humor.** *Use humor whenever possible, though not at the person's expense.* People with dementia tend to retain their social skills and are usually delighted to laugh along with you.

Handling Troubling Behavior

Some of the greatest challenges of caring for a consumer with dementia are the personality and behavior changes that often occur. You can best meet these challenges by using creativity, flexibility, patience and compassion. It also helps to not take things personally and maintain your sense of humor.

To start, consider these ground rules:

We cannot change the person. The person you are caring for has a brain disorder that shapes who he has become. When you try to control or change his behavior, you'll most likely be unsuccessful or be met with resistance. It's important to:

- *Try to accommodate the behavior, not control the behavior.* For example, if the person insists on sleeping on the floor, place a mattress on the floor to make him more comfortable.
- *Remember that we **can** change our behavior or the physical environment.* Changing our own behavior will often result in a change in our consumer's behavior.

Check with the doctor first. Behavioral problems may have an underlying medical reason: perhaps the person is in pain or experiencing an adverse side effect from medications. In some cases, like incontinence or hallucinations, there may be some medication or treatment that can assist in managing the problem.

Behavior has a purpose. People with dementia typically cannot tell us what they want or need. They might do something, like take all the clothes out of the closet on a daily basis, and we wonder why. It is very likely that the person is fulfilling a need to be busy and productive. *Always consider what need the person might be trying to meet with their behavior – and, when possible, try to accommodate them.*

Behavior is triggered. It is important to understand that all behavior is triggered – it doesn't occur out of the blue. It might be something a person did or said that triggered a behavior or it could be a change in the physical environment. *The root to changing behavior is disrupting the patterns that we create.* Try a different approach, or try a different consequence.

What works today, may not tomorrow. The multiple factors that influence troubling behaviors and the natural progression of the disease process means that solutions that are effective today may need to be modified tomorrow – or may no longer work at all. The key to managing difficult behaviors is being creative and flexible in your strategies to address a given issue.

Used with permission from Family Caregiver Alliance, National Center on Caregiving. "Caregiver's Guide to Understanding Dementia Behaviors," retrieved from <http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver>, October 2013.

Communicating with Persons with Dementia

M	<p>MAXIMIZE attention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attract attention by calling the person by name, moving to eye level and getting eye contact. • Avoid distractions by turning off TV, going to quiet environment, etc. • One at a time: persons with dementia do better engaging with one person at a time, not groups. Don't carry on a conversation with someone else on the side.
E	<p>EXPRESSION and body language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nonverbal communication is the strongest form of communication, esp. in later stages of dementia. • Show interest. • Be relaxed & calm.
S	<p>Keep it SIMPLE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use short sentences and familiar words. • Give one piece of information at a time. • Rephrase as necessary, repeat names of objects rather than using pronouns.
S	<p>SUPPORT their conversation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give time to respond (4-5 seconds). • Find the word: don't leave the person stranded if they cannot find a word; rather, help finish sentence or suggest a word. • Repeat then rephrase. • Give reminders of the topic.
A	<p>ASSIST with visual aids:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate an action related to what you are talking about (i.e. dressing, eating). • Show objects or images.
G	<p>GET their message:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make extra effort to understand the meaning of the person's efforts at communicating, believing that all communication is meaningful. • Prompt the person to continue by affirming, using phrases like really?, uh huh, etc. • Rephrase what was said and repeat it back to the person. • Look for nonverbal messages.
E	<p>ENCOURAGE and ENGAGE in communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need for relationship with others remains, no matter the degree of dementia. • Talk about things you know the other person is interested in and can relate to; use familiar objects and/or photos. • Evoke old memories. • Don't ask "test" questions the person is incapable of answering; this will only frustrate (i.e. if they don't know the answer drop the question). • Don't correct the person or argue; change the subject to distract.