

How to communicate with a person with Dementia

Dementia affects everyone differently so it's important to communicate in a way that is right for the person. Listen carefully to what they are expressing and pay attention to body language as it is also a form of communication. Think about what you're going to say and how you'll say it, pay attention to your body language and tone of voice. Remember, you can communicate meaningfully without using spoken words through your body language. Every person's experience of dementia is unique, so not every tip may be helpful to the person you care for. Use the tips that you feel will improve communication between you as a caregiver and the care recipient, client or your loved one.

Before you communicate

Making sure the care recipient is comfortable

- Make sure you're in a good place to communicate. Ideally it will be a quiet and calm environment with good lighting. Busy environments can make it especially difficult for a person with dementia to concentrate on the conversation. For best results, turn down the volume on the TV or radio, ensure good lighting and the environment is calm, have a face-to-face conversation.
- If there is a time of day where the person is able to communicate more clearly, for example at noon, try to use this time to ask any questions or talk about anything you need to with them, or encourage them to express self or reminisce.
- Make the most of the 'good' days and find ways to adapt on more difficult ones, flexibility is key.
- Make sure any of the person's other needs are met before you start – ensure they are clean, not hungry, not in any pain, and have their bathroom needs met before you start. Anticipating this will promote you to have a more pleasant and successful conversation.

Preparing to communicate with a person with dementia

- Try to put self in the other person shoes - think how you would feel if you struggled to communicate, and what would help you to express self.
- Plan enough time to spend with the person. If you feel rushed or stressed, take some time to become calmer beforehand. Don't rush the person when

they are trying to express self or answer your questions – be patient, calm and understanding.

- Think about previous conversations you have had with the person and what helped you to communicate well then, perhaps it may help now as well.
- If the person has begun to communicate using the first language they learned, and you do not speak it, consider arranging for family members or friends who also speak the language to be there with you. Perhaps learn few simple phrases for easier communication. If the person prefers reading, try using translated written materials. A translation or interpretation app on a smart phone can translate between you if you don't speak the same language. There are also interpreter services available within the community.
- Get the person's full attention before you start: face to face interaction with good eye contact are best to gather the attention. However, of note to consider that in some cultures eye contact could be interpreted as a rude gesture, so ensure to familiarize first if that's appropriate within the family culture.

Things to consider about conversation topics

- Think about what you are going to talk about. It may be useful to have an idea for a particular topic ready. For example, perhaps talking about cooking and food or conversations about gardening or even reminiscing about past events could be helpful to start a good rapport with the person.
- If you are not sure what to talk about, you can use the person's environment to help – anything that they can see, hear or touch might be of interest.
- If you need a task to be completed, ensure to keep questions simple and straight to the point. Do not go into deep details or over-explain as it can cause confusion and uncooperating. For example, instead of saying “would you like to take a shower now or in the afternoon or evening”, try saying “it's time for a shower, would you like some help setting everything up?” and guide them to the washroom.

Listening

Tips for listening to a person with dementia

- Listen carefully to what the person is saying. Offer encouragement both verbally and non-verbally, for example by making eye contact and nodding. This 'active listening' can help improve communication.
- The person's body language can show a lot about their emotions. The expression on their face and the way they hold themselves can give you clear signals about how they are feeling when they communicate – fear, anxiety, frustrations, happiness or anger.
- If you haven't fully understood what the person has said, ask them to repeat it. If you are still unclear, rephrase their answer to check your understanding of what they meant.
- If the person with dementia has difficulty finding the right word or finishing a sentence, ask them to explain it in a different way. Listen and look out for clues. If they cannot find the word for a particular object, ask them to describe it instead.

Supporting the person to express themselves

- Allow the person plenty of time to respond – it may take them longer to process the information and work out their response. Do not rush them.
- Try not to interrupt what the person means or says – even to help them find a word – as it can break the pattern of communication. Let them have enough time to express self, and then you can ask or rephrase what they mean.
- If the person is upset, let them express their feelings. Allow them the time that they need, and try not to dismiss their worries – sometimes the best thing to do is just listen, and show that you are there and care.

How to communicate

Ways to communicate with a person with dementia

- Communicate clearly and calmly.
- Use short, simple sentences.
- Don't talk to the person as you would to a child – be patient and have respect for them.
- Try to communicate with the person in a conversational way, rather than asking question after question which may feel quite intimidating.
- Include the person in conversations with others. It is important not to speak as though they are not there. Being included can help them keep their sense of identity and know they are valued and important promoting their feeling of belonging. It can also help them to feel less excluded or isolated.
- If the person becomes tired easily, then short, regular conversations may be better.
- Avoid speaking sharply or raising your voice.

How to pace conversations

- Go at a slightly slower pace than usual if the person is struggling to follow the conversation.
- Allow time between sentences for the person to process the information and respond. These pauses might feel uncomfortable if they become quite long, but it is important to give the person time to respond.
- Try to let the person complete their own sentences, and try not to be too quick to assume you know what they are trying to say. Give them time and patience.

Things to consider about body language

- Stand or sit where the person can see and hear you as clearly as possible – usually this will be in front of them, and with your face well-lit. Try to be at eye-level with them, rather than standing over them.
- Be as close to the person as is comfortable for you both, so that you can clearly hear each other, and make eye contact as you would with anyone.
- Prompts can help, for instance pointing at a photo of someone or encouraging the person to hold and interact with an object you are talking about, or pointing at a picture regarding an activity such as going for a walk, eating or bathroom.

- Try to make sure your body language is open and relaxed.

What to communicate

Tips for asking questions

- Try to avoid asking too many questions, or asking complicated questions. The person may become frustrated or withdrawn if they can't find the answer.
- Try to stick to one idea at a time. Giving someone a choice is important, but too many options can be confusing and frustrating. For example, instead of asking variety of choices of clothing to wear, ask them to choose between green or blue sweater instead.
- Phrase questions in a way that allows for a simple answer. For example, rather than asking someone what they would like to drink, ask if they would like tea or coffee. Questions with a 'yes' or 'no' answer are easier to answer.

What to do if the person has difficulty understanding

- If the person doesn't understand what you're saying even after you repeat it, try saying it in a slightly different way instead. Creativity and flexibility are key.
- If the person is finding it hard to understand, consider breaking down what you're saying into smaller chunks so that it is more manageable.
- Try to laugh together about misunderstandings and mistakes. Humor can help to relieve tension and bring you closer together. Make sure the person doesn't feel you are laughing at them.

Communication with someone with Hearing Loss

Successful communication requires the efforts of all people involved in a conversation. Even when the person with hearing loss utilizes hearing aids and active listening strategies, it is crucial that others involved in the communication consistently use good communication strategies as well, including the following:

- *Face the hearing-impaired person directly*, on the same level and in good light whenever possible. Position yourself so that the light is shining on the speaker's face, not in the eyes of the listener.
- *Do not talk from another room*. Not being able to see each other when talking is a common reason people have difficulty understanding what is said, especially those with hearing loss despite hearing aids may not hear you or understand what you are trying to say.
- *Speak clearly, slowly but in normal pace, distinctly, but naturally, without shouting or exaggerating mouth movements*. Shouting distorts the sound of speech and may make speech reading more difficult. Shouting is not necessary as it will not make it easier to hear, rather may make it harder to interpret what you are trying to say.
- Say the person's name before beginning a conversation or *get their attention* by tapping their shoulder or arm. This gives the listener a chance to focus attention and reduces the chance of missing words at the beginning of the conversation.
- *Avoid talking too rapidly or using sentences that are too complex*. Slow down a little, pause between sentences or phrases, and wait to make sure you have been understood before going on.
- *Keep your hands away from your face while talking*. If you are eating, chewing, smoking, etc. while talking, your speech will be more difficult to understand. Beards and moustaches can also interfere with the ability of the hearing impaired to speech read.
- *Gestures and facial expressions can be helpful* when explaining. For example, using facial expressions to show if something is painful, scary, or using a thumbs up sign to show there is nothing to worry about.
- If the hearing-impaired listener hears better in one ear than the other, try to make a point of *remembering which ear is better* so that you will know where to position yourself.
- *Be aware of possible distortion of sounds* for the hearing-impaired person. They may hear your voice, but still may have difficulty understanding some words. Sometimes it is easier to pick up or hear a lower tone voice than higher pitch voice.

- Most hearing-impaired people have greater difficulty understanding speech when there is *background noise*. Try to minimize extraneous background noise when talking, such as turn off TV's or radios.
- Some people with hearing loss are very *sensitive to loud sounds*. This reduced tolerance for loud sounds is not uncommon. Avoid situations where there will be loud sounds or noises when possible, or warn them for example when using a blender to avoid surprising them or startling them.
- If the hearing-impaired person has difficulty understanding a particular phrase or word, *try to find a different way of saying the same thing*, rather than repeating the original words over and over.
- *Familiarize the listener with the general topic of the conversation*. Avoid sudden changes of topic. If the subject is changed, tell the hearing impaired person what you are talking about now. You may need to repeat questions or key facts before continuing with the discussion to ensure understanding.
- If you are giving specific information – such as time, place or phone numbers – to someone who is hearing impaired, have them *repeat the specifics of the information back to you or write it down*. Many numbers and words sound alike.
- If you are having difficulty explaining something you can *use written notes, pictures or diagrams to assist communication*.
- Whenever possible, *provide relevant information in writing*, such as directions, schedules, work assignments, etc.. Sometimes communicating through writing may be easier, such as written notes or text messages.
- Recognize that everyone, especially the hard-of-hearing, has a *harder time hearing and understanding when ill or tired*.
- *Pay attention to the listener facial expression and body language*. A puzzled look may indicate misunderstanding. Tactfully ask the hearing-impaired person if they understood you, or ask leading questions so you know your message got across.
- *Take turns speaking and avoid interrupting* other speakers to avoid confusion.

There are also available courses that you can take if interested for better communication with hearing impaired individuals or deaf speakers. Sign language interpreter courses can help to learn and understand the basics of communication with those who are deaf or hearing impaired and know sign language. Keep checking to make sure your care recipient understands you. If your care recipient doesn't understand you, try and think of a different way to explain and help them understand. Always treat the individual with respect and understanding, be patient and ensure they are included in conversations.

How to Communicate Effectively with Older Adults

Caring for and having successful relationships with older adults often requires unique communication skills and strategies. We will discuss five tips for successful communication with senior care recipients. Not all of these ideas may apply to your particular situation or the older adult involved. Simply use what works. These ideas also presume that the relationship with the senior is relatively positive and that the senior care recipient is relatively cooperative.

1. Exercise Patience and Compassion

Patience and compassion are often needed when communicating with the elderly. Physical challenges, slow movement, forgetfulness, neediness, and apathy are just some of the behaviors you as a caregiver or a family member of their loved one may encounter. Sometimes it's easy to lose patience and become frustrated. Caregiver may even be tempted to give up and walk away entirely. During these moments, it's very helpful to put yourself in the older adult shoes, even for just a moment. Consider the older adult you're communicating with, and complete the sentence: "It must not be easy..." or "It must be hard..." For example:

"She's being so apathetic. It must not be easy to live without her friends around."

"He does everything so slowly. It must be hard to deal with arthritis every day."

Having empathy for the older adult is an effective way to generate more patience and compassion. If, despite your best efforts, your patience still runs thin, take a time out from the care recipient if possible. Come back when you're in a calmer state of mind.

2. Ask Instead of Ordering

One of the core needs of many individuals is to feel relevant and respected. Older adults or care recipients dignity and autonomy must be respected as an individual. You can help validate these needs by frequently asking instead of ordering when communicating with the care recipient. For example:

Instead of: "You're having soup for lunch today."

Say: "Would you like to have some soup for lunch?" or

“We’re having soup for lunch today, okay?”

Better yet, offer options: “Would you like to have soup or salad for lunch today?”

Asking questions offers the individual a greater sense of respect and regard. Offering options gives her or him a greater sense of control of the immediate environment and makes them feel accomplished and important in participating in their own care and taking control of their life events. With less cognition and physically able seniors, ask and follow up without necessarily waiting for an answer. Let them feel they’re part of the decision-making process and have a degree of control over some aspects of their lives to promote their autonomy.

3. Ask Instead of Assuming

Similarly, ask questions instead of making assumptions when it comes to your actions in relation to the care recipient. When we assume we do not provide quality care and infringe on their dignity and autonomy, it can even interfere with the care provided or negatively impact your relationship with the care recipient. For example, instead of turning the lights off in the care recipient room without asking, say, “I’m going to turn off the lights for you, is that okay?” If the older adult protests, let them have it their way if it’s harmless. Otherwise, explain why it’s important for you to do what you need to do (in most cases for the sake of their health and well-being).

4. Use “I” instead of “You” Language

We know from the study of effective communication that individuals generally don’t respond well when they feel like they’re constantly being ordered what to do or treated as a child, in other terms - disrespected. Such “bossy” language is often manifested in the use of “you” statements, followed by a directive. For example:

“You must exercise today!”

“You have to take your medicine!”

“You need to air out your room!”

“You need to finish your soup!”

“You better not miss the doctor’s appointment!”

When people feel like they’re being bossed around and disrespected on a regular basis, especially in their home, they’re more likely going to respond with what psychologists call the “Three F’s — Fight, Flight, and Freeze,” leading to behavioral problems such as argument, frustrations, avoidance, or withdrawal. They may be less cooperative with your requests and negatively impact your rapport with them.

Instead, use statements that begin with “I,” “It,” “We,” “Let’s,” and “This,” to convey messages and have a more positive outcome. For example:

“I will help you with your exercise today.”

“It’s important to take your medications this morning for blood pressure.”

“We need to get some fresh air into the room, let’s open a window perhaps.”

“Let’s finish your soup, okay?”

“This doctor’s appointment is very important, let’s put it on the calendar.”

These types of statements compel the older adult to be more open to what you have to say, encourage listening, and reduce the possibility of Fight, Flight, or Freeze responses. It improves the rapport and promotes good relationship between the caregiver and care recipient. In addition, it promotes the older adult to be more active in the decision making and feel more respected as an individual.

5. Offer Choices Whenever Possible

Many older adults desire to maintain a sense of independence and autonomy. This may be especially important when seniors feel their physical and cognitive limitations, but still desire ways to maintain some level of local control in their lives. *It is important to preserve their rights and dignity and promote independence whenever possible* as long as it is safe to do so. Whenever possible and appropriate, offer choices to an older adult or care recipient when interacting with him or her. This can be something as simple as asking whether they'd like to have choice A or choice B for lunch. Having the ability to exercise choice can provide the individual with a greater sense of confidence, esteem, autonomy, a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment, and security, as the senior feels the power to be proactive in their own life.