

Common Communication Problems and Possible Solutions

Alzheimer's Support Network Supplement to "How to Communicate with Someone with Alzheimer's"

Alzheimer's patients have good and bad days.

The good days can be deceiving and hurtful. They give caregivers a clear reminder of how things were and fill them with hope. Then when the bad days come, the loss of their love ones is experienced all over again. Knowing the up's and down's are coming is the first step in preparing for them.

Long Term vs. Short Term Memory

Long term memory is stored in multiple parts of the brain. While short term memory is stored in the hippocampus, the exact area of the brain that Alzheimer's attacks. Thus, new memories are prohibited from transferring from short term to long term storage. Something is experienced, and then it's gone.

So, how do I communicate with someone with Alzheimer's?

Feelings are the most important thing. If your prime concern is the person's feelings, then most arguments can be seen for what they are: unimportant.

Please keep in mind, all the person with Alzheimer's has is the current moment. And often that moment is not in the present time, but in some time past. If you want to communicate with them, you must join them Where They Are.

Should I tell the person with Alzheimer's that they have it?

Why? Why would you do that? The answer caregivers usually give is: because if he knows he has Alzheimer's then he will understand, he will stop fighting me, he will cooperate.

This would be true if he could logically think through not only the information presented but its implications. And then, only if those logical conclusions could be maintained as learned memory. These are exactly the processes that are attacked by Alzheimer's.

Wanting to tell him he has Alzheimer's, and for him to understand it, accept it, and remember it highlights exactly what you are losing. You are losing that person who logically thinks through these sequences and retains the resulting conclusions. That is what is lost.

What remains, what you still have is the person you know, living in the moment, for that moment. How do you reach that person? Share the moment with him.

Your loved one is not lying, not being stubborn, even though he is telling you things that are not true, even though he's not doing what you want him to do. To attribute adverse motives to the behavior you see will not solve the problem, but it will make you frustrated and angry. To be frustrated and angry at the disease is understandable and healthy. To be frustrated and angry at your love one for saying he took his pills when he didn't, this is like being angry at your husband because his heart disease makes him dizzy.

“The person with Alzheimer's doesn't lay in wait and try to figure out how to hurt your feelings.” But it sure seems like it. You might not be able to stop your love one from saying hurtful things to you. How you respond IS under your control. How you respond is up to you.

Word Accuracy:

Should I allow my wife to struggle to find the correct word, or should I just tell her? The answer here depends on how your wife will react. If it's important to her to come up with the right word herself, then it's important for you to give her the time and space she needs to do that. But many times, the Alzheimer's patient is simply struggling to find the right word, or is unaware they have used the wrong word. The caregiver corrects them in order to teach them, to reorient them to reality, or simply is nit picking.

You are NOT going to teach someone with Alzheimer's. Period. It does them no good, and it sets up walls between you and your loved ones. Constantly correcting them, making sure they know and use the right words, keeps your focus on what is truly unimportant, rather than allowing you to let go of the nit picking, and focus on enjoying the person you do have with you.

Repeated Questions:

Don't try to make the question go away. Try to make the worry behind the question go away. Sooth, reassure, and create avenues for them to find relaxation.

Aggressive Behavior:

You can ask yourself, what is my role? Did I contribute to this? Rushing, speaking harshly, forcing or sudden approaches can often induce an aggressive reaction. When this is encountered, stop. Back off, and try again later.

When Words Don't Work:

Things that often speak louder than words are:

Non-verbal clues (motion with your hand, instead of saying: 'come here')

Tone of voice (Let's face it, caregiving is stressful. Sometime we are unaware of our own tone.)

Body posture (Just because they have Alzheimer's doesn't mean they don't know when you're not listening. The way you are sitting in your chair may say more than what comes out of your mouth.)

Word Choices:

Avoid negatives

Use short, simple sentences

Avoid baby talk, and talking down to them

When words don't work, try singing (Studies have shown that music is stored in multiple parts of the brain simultaneously.)

Where's Sally?

Incorrect answer: Sally is dead, don't you remember?

Better answer: Tell me about Sally.

Trying to reorientate the person back to reality to the fact that Sally is dead can have a serious emotional impact. And for what purpose? Avoiding the subject completely might not work either. Their concern is not addressed; they are not heard. But to say: Tell me about Sally, this gives them an opening to talk about what they want to talk about, and more, leads them into a discussion that takes them away from the question (where is Sally) and into a thought, a memory about Sally.

Where is Sally?

Tell me about Sally?

Well, she's my wife. She was born in Chicago.

Oh, Chicago. I love Chicago. Hey, do you like bratwurst ?

Sure.

I think I have some in the kitchen, let's go see.

“There is beauty in simplicity, and being in the present moment. The person with Alzheimer's needs your presence, a loving touch, a fun activity, or a reminder of something in the past. Not a lot of words.”