

Ten Tips for Communicating with a Person with Dementia



We aren't born knowing how to communicate with a person with dementia—but we can learn. Improving your communication skills will help make caregiving less stressful and will likely improve the quality of your relationship with your loved one. Good communication skills will also enhance your ability to handle the difficult behavior you may encounter as you care for a person with a dementia 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 loved one in a pleasant and respectful manner. Use facial expressions, tone of voice and physical touch 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 loved one's reply. If she is struggling for an answer, it's okay to suggest words. 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 loved one 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 loved one 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.