



COMMUNICATION

People with dementia should be encouraged to communicate in whatever way they are most comfortable with. This will help them to preserve their own sense of identity and improve their quality of life.

Communication consists of much more than verbal language. Non-verbal communication is particularly significant for people with dementia and it is very important to be aware of it. We are all familiar with the saying “actions speak louder than words”. This is particularly true of people who are losing their language skills. Much of the behavior, which causes problems for carers, may actually be an attempt by the person with dementia to communicate.

Language skills

An early sign of language being affected by dementia is that the person becomes unable to find the right words – particularly the names of objects. The person may substitute another incorrect word or they may be unable to find a word at all. As the dementia progresses, they will be less able to start a conversation and the carer may have to become accustomed to taking the initiative.

Try to avoid asking direct questions – a person with dementia may become frustrated if they cannot find the answer. In the earlier stages of dementia they will be able to express these feelings, but later on they may respond with general irritation or even aggression. Most of our ordinary social conversations are based on asking questions, so this is a difficult skill for carers to learn.

There may come a time when the person can hardly communicate in language at all.

Not only will they be unable to find the words of objects, they may even forget your name. People quite often confuse the generations, mistaking their wife for their mother, or their son for their husband. This can be very distressing for family members and carers.

However, the reason lies in memory loss, which is one of the most striking symptoms of dementia. People with dementia may be trying to interpret a world which no longer makes sense to them because their brain is feeding them incorrect information. Many difficulties which arise are the result of misinterpretations both by the person with dementia and by the carer of what the other person is trying to communicate.

If you, as a carer, become caught up in such misinterpretations you are likely to feel very distressed and will need support and guidance on handling the situation.



Tips to help with communication

Listening

- Always try to listen carefully to what the person is saying and encourage them to talk. At all costs, do not patronize them or correct them for trivial errors. Most of us react badly to being treated as if we were small children – and people with dementia are no different in this respect.
- Look for the emotions/feelings, rather than the facts.
- If the person has difficulty in finding the right word, or in finishing a sentence, ask them to explain in a different way. Listen for cues.
- Offer a guess such as “is this the scarf you want?”
- If a person’s speech has become hard to understand, use the knowledge that you both have about each other to interpret what you think they may be trying to say. Always check back with them to see if you are right. It can be infuriating to have your sentences finished incorrectly by someone else! Do not rush the person by finishing a sentence for them.

Gaining attention

- Approach from the front and identify yourself.
- Try to catch and hold the attention of the person before you start to communicate.
- Address him/her by name.
- Try to position yourself so that they can see you clearly.
- It may be useful to introduce yourself if the person with dementia is looking confused.
- Make eye contact. This will help them to focus on you.
- Try to minimize competing noises, such as the radio, TV or the conversation of other people.
- Limit distractions

Body language

- Try to remain calm and still while you are speaking. This will convey the message that you are giving the person your full attention and that you have time for them.
- A person with dementia will read your body language. Agitated movements or a tense expression on your face may upset them and make communication more difficult.



- Try to find ways to relax so that your body language communicates calmness and confidence.
- You can pick up cues about the way the other person is feeling from their body language, even if words fail them. Facial expressions, the way they hold themselves and move about can give clear signals about how they are feeling.

Speaking

- Speak clearly and calmly. Try not to speak sharply or raise your voice. This may distress the other person, even if they are unable to follow the sense of the words.
- Avoid vague words e.g. “Here it is” rather “Here is your purse” which is more specific.
- Use simple, short sentences.
- Avoid confusing expressions e.g. “hop into the shower”.
- The person will need longer than they used to in order to process information – so allow enough time. Try not to hurry them.
- If you do they will feel that you are putting them under pressure, even if that is not your intention.
- Give visual clues and cues.
- Try to avoid asking direct questions, but if you have to, ask the questions one at a time and phrase them as much as possible in a way that allows for a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer.
- People with dementia find it hard to make choices and are likely to become confused and frustrated if they are asked to do so.
- Emphasize key words e.g. Here is your hat!
- If the person does not understand what you are saying, don’t keep on repeating.
- Use positive rather than negative statements where possible e.g. “Come with me” rather than “Don’t go there”.

Encourage spontaneity

- Humour can help to bring you closer together and is a good safety valve. Laughing together about misunderstandings and mistakes can help.
- If the other person is feeling sad they have a right to express these feelings. All you can do is show them that you care.



Showing respect

- Never speak down to the other person or treat them like a child, even if they appear to understand very little of what you say. Do not allow other people to do this either.
- Try to include the person with dementia in conversations with others. You may find that you can slightly alter the form of words other people are using to help the conversations along.
- Always talk as if the person with dementia can understand every word you are saying even if they are unable to respond.
- Including people with dementia in social groups helps to preserve their fragile sense of their own identity. It also helps to protect them from the feelings of exclusion and isolation, which can be overwhelming. Remind yourself again that everyone reacts badly to being patronized.
- It is also important not to converse across the person with dementia as if they are not present. People with a variety of disabilities complain of being treated in this way, but it is a particular hazard for people with dementia. If you are getting little response from the person it can be very tempting to do this. But it can cause great irritation, frustration and sadness.

Whose reality?

Avoid criticizing and correcting. Fact and fantasy can become confused as dementia progresses. Try not to respond with a flat contradiction to a statement that you know to be untrue. It is better to change the form of the words you use when you respond. Thus, if the person says, 'We must leave now – mother is waiting for me', you might reply, 'Your mother used to wait for you, didn't she?' At all costs avoid making the person with dementia feel foolish in front of others. Avoid arguing.

Other difficulties

Pain, discomfort, illness or the side effects of medication can also make communication more difficult. Check with the GP at once if you suspect that this might be happening. Problems with sight, hearing or ill-fitting dentures can also hinder communication. Make sure that prescription glasses are correct, that hearing aids are working properly and dentures fit well and are comfortable.



Keeping close

Affection can help to keep you close even when conversation becomes more difficult. You can communicate your care and affection by the tone of your voice and the touch of your hand. The reassurance you can give by holding the person's hand, or putting your arm around them (if that is appropriate) should never be underestimated. Here again we can see that actions can speak louder than words.

- Ask the person to point or gesture if the words will not come.
- Write things down – mark items and rooms.