

# Tips for Communicating with People with Dementia

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## Good communications tips for any situation

- Always approach from the front so you do not startle the person
- Determine how close the person wants you to be
- Communicate in a calm place with little noise or distraction
- Always identify yourself and use the person's name
- Speak slowly-- using a lower voice is calming and easier to understand
- Be aware and adjust your approach if the person has a hearing impairment

## Communicating with people who have dementia

*If the person...*

*You should...*

**Is frightened or anxious**

- Move and speak slowly
- Try to see and hear yourself as they might-- always describe what you are going to do
- Use simple language and short sentences. If performing a procedure or assisting with self-care, simplify and list steps one at a time.
- Check your non-verbal language. Are you tense or hurried?

**Forgets, shows memory loss**

- Use the same words if you need to, repeat an instruction or question. However, you may be using a word the person doesn't understand, such as "tired." Try other words like "nap," "lie down," or "rest."

**Has trouble finding words or names; substitutes sound-alike words**

- Suggest what you think the word is. If this upsets the person, learn from it and try not to correct. As communicating with words (written and spoken) becomes more difficult, smiling, touching, and hugging can help communicate love and concern-- remember some people find touch frightening or unwelcome.

**Seems not to understand basic instructions or questions**

- Ask the person to repeat your statements. Use short words and sentences, allowing time to answer
- Pay attention to the communication methods that are effective and use them
- Watch for non-verbal communication as the ability to talk diminishes. Observe body language: eyes, hands, facial expressions
- Use signs, labels, or written messages

**Repeats phrases or questions over and over**

- This is part of the disease. Answer the questions the same way each time. Even though responding over and over may frustrate you, it communicates comfort and security.

*If the person...*

*You should...*

**Wants to say something but cannot**

- Encourage people to point, gesture, or mime. If they are obviously upset, but cannot explain why, just offer comfort with a hug, a smile, or distraction techniques. Attempting to verbalize may be more frustrating.

**Is disoriented about time and place**

- Post reminders, such as calendars, activity boards, pictures, and signs on doors. Prior to the final stage of dementia, signs and labels can sometimes help with orientation. However, reality orientation does not help in the later stages of Alzheimer's.

**Does not remember how to perform basic tasks**

- Help by breaking each activity into simple steps. For instance, "Let's go for a walk. Stand up. Put on your sweater. First the right arm..." Always encourage people to do what they can

**Reminisces or lives in the past**

- Encourage reminiscing if it seems to give pleasure. It is an opportunity to learn more about the person.

**Insists on doing something that is unsafe or not allowed**

- Try to limit the times you say "don't." Instead, redirect activities toward something constructive

**Hallucinates, is paranoid or accusing**

- Do not take it personally. Try to redirect behavior or ignore it. Because attention span is limited, this behavior often passes quickly.

**Is depressed, lonely**

- Take time, one-on-one, to ask how the person is feeling. Really listen. Try to involve the person in activities. Always report depression to your supervisor

**Is verbally abusive, uses bad language**

- Remember it is the dementia speaking and not the person. Try to ignore the words; redirect attention to something else

**Has lost most verbal skills**

- As speaking abilities decline, use non-verbal communication. People with AD will understand touch, smiles, laughter, much longer than they will understand the spoken or written word.
- However, remember that some people do not like to be touched. Approach touching slowly. Be gentle, softly touching the hand or placing your arm around the person. A hug or a kiss can express affection and caring. A smile can say you want to help.
- Even after verbal abilities are lost, signs, labels, and gestures can reach people with dementia.

Assume people with AD can understand more than they can express. Never talk about them as though they were not there

Adapted from Siciliano, P. (1999) "Caring for the Person with Alzheimer's or Other Dementias," Hartman Publishing.