# Communication – Tips for Successful Communication at all Stages of Alzheimer's Disease

Adapted from the Alzheimer's Association booklet Communication

**Communication is:**

- **How we relate to one another.**
- **An important part of our relationships.**
- **How we express our needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge and feelings.**
- **The exchange of thoughts, messages and information.**
- **More about listening than talking.**
- **About attitude, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language.**

Communication and Dementia

As the disease progresses, the communication skills of a person with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia will gradually decline. Eventually, he or she will have more difficulty expressing thoughts and emotions. The challenges associated with communication can lead to frustration. It can be helpful for you to understand what changes may occur over time so you can prepare and make adjustments. Anticipating these changes and knowing how to respond can help everyone communicate more effectively.

Changes in the ability to communicate can vary and are based on the person and where he or she is in the disease process. Problems you can expect to see at carious stages of the disease include:

- Difficulty finding the right words.
- Using familiar words repeatedly.
- Describing familiar objects rather than calling them by name.
- Easily losing a train of thought.
- Difficulty organizing words logically.
- Reverting to speaking a native language.
- Speaking less often.
- Relying on gestures more than speaking.

Communication in the Early Stages

In the early stage of Alzheimer's disease, sometimes referred to as mild Alzheimer's in a medical contest, an individual is still able to participate in meaningful conversation and engage is social activities. However, he or she may repeat stories, have difficulty finding the right word or feel overwhelmed by excessive stimulation.

Tips for successful communication:

- Don't make assumptions about a person's ability to communicate because of an Alzheimer's diagnosis. The disease effects each person differently.
- Don't exclude the person from conversation with others.
- Speak directly to the person if you want to know how he or she is doing.

- Take time to listen to how the person is feeling, what she is thinking or may need.
- Give the person time to respond, don't interrupt or finish sentences unless the person asks for help finding a word or finishing a sentence.
- Talk with the person about what he or she is still comfortable doing and what they may need help with.
- Explore which method of communications is most comfortable for the person. This could include email, phone call or in-person conversations.
- It's OK to laugh. Sometimes humor lightens the mood and makes communication easier.
- Be honest and frank about your feelings. Don't pull away; your friendship and support are important to the person living with dementia.

# 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 for 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 dementing illness.

1. **Set a positive mood for interaction.** Your attitude and body language communicate your feelings and thoughts more strongly that your words do. 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 you 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 (he, she, they) 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 questions 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.** If your loved one becomes upset or agitated, 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."*



2019.11.15

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 you sense of humor.** *Use humor whenever possible, though not at the person's expense.* People with dementia tend to retain their social skill and are usually delighted to laugh along with you.

*This fact sheet was prepared by Family Caregiver Alliance and was reviewed by Beth Logan, M.S.W*



2019.11.15

# 101 Ways to Spend Time with a Person with Alzheimer's

Adapted from the Alzheimer's Association

1. Listen to music
2. Toss a ball
3. Color pictures
4. Make homemade juice
5. Count trading cards
6. Clip coupons
7. Sort poker chips
8. Read out loud favorite stories
9. Rake leaves
10. String beads
11. Bake cookies
12. Take photos of the person and create a collage
13. Brush one another's hair
14. Participate in the Alzheimer's Association Walk to End Alzheimer's
15. Plant seeds indoors or outdoors
16. Look at family pictures
17. Wipe off the kitchen table
18. Weed the flowerbed
19. Fold Laundry
20. Have a friend visit with a well-behaved pet.
21. Cut pictures out of magazines
22. Play dominoes
23. Ask the person about his or her favorite childhood books or cartoon characters
24. Bake homemade bread
25. Sort objects by shape or color
26. Sing old songs
27. Invite the person to tell you more when he or she talks about a memory
28. Put silverware away
29. Make a card
30. Play and sing songs
31. Ask the person about his or her brothers and sisters
32. Make a pie.
33. Take a walk around the yard.
34. Write a poem together
35. Reminisce about the 1st day of school
36. String Cheerios to hang outside for birds
37. Make a fresh fruit salad
38. Sweep the patio
39. Color in coloring book
40. Fold towels
41. Have a tea party
42. Talk about great inventions
43. Look through the pages of a clothes catalog
44. Look at a map of the US and identify states
45. Make a family tree
46. Color a picture
47. Eat a picnic lunch outside
48. Water house plants
49. Play horseshoes
50. Dance
51. Watch Sesame Street
52. Make homemade Ice cream
53. Make holiday cards
54. Make get well cards
55. Reminisce about favorite sports enjoyed while growing up
56. Write a letter to a friend or family member
57. Dress in your favorite football team's color
58. Pop Popcorn
59. Name the presidents
60. Give a manicure
61. Make paper butterflies
62. Plant a tree
63. Finish famous sayings
64. Feed the ducks
65. Model with play dough
66. Look at pictures in a comic book
67. Put a puzzle together
68. Sand wood
69. Rub in hand lotion
70. Arrange fresh flowers
71. Remember famous people
72. Make peanut butter sandwiches
73. Cut up used paper for scratch paper
74. Blow bubbles
75. Take care of a fish tank
76. Brush the dog
77. Bake and decorate cupcakes
78. Interview someone about their life.
79. Play Hangman
80. Finger paint
81. Put coins in a jar
82. Sort buttons
83. Put birdseed out for birds
84. Decorate a pumpkin
85. Match socks
86. Reminisce about favorite summers
87. Roll yarn in a ball
88. Collect Autumn leaves
89. Cook a meal together
90. Make crafts
91. Wash plastic dishes
92. Give hugs
93. Ask them to teach you their favorite hobby
94. Make a picture frame
95. Play an instrument together
96. Write in a diary
97. Ask about their heroes
98. Sort playing cards
99. Ask about their favorite pet
100. Wash windows together

101 Ask about their 1st car

2019.11.15

# How to Comfort People with Severe Memory Loss

Wendy Lustbader, M.S.W

## SPEAKING TO FEELINGS

The nonverbal sensing ability in people with severe memory loss is frequently as keen as that possessed by young children. Instead of listening to loved ones' words, people with dementia react to the anxiety in someone's tone of voice, body posture, and facial expression. Learning to speak to feelings takes practice, but it can be much more effective than relying on words alone. Caregivers may need to separate themselves from the agitated person for a few minutes to compose themselves and master their own feelings before trying to calm their relative through a soothing voice, relaxed posture, and serene facial expression.

## PAST AS PRESENT

It is usually not fruitful to try to force currently accurate information on someone whose thoughts are focused in another time and who is consequently uninterested in "reality" as known by family members. For example, if the person speaks happily about deceased relatives as if they are still alive, there is no point in making the person experience fresh grief. However, if the person asks directly whether a deceased loved one is still alive, then it is important to give accurate information. Families must listen closely to distinguish reality testing from speech which moves back and forth in time without concern for current information.

## SUNDOWNING: AGITATION DURING THE TRANSITION FROM DAY TO NIGHT

When the sun begins to go down, people with severe memory loss often become more confused and agitated. This problem is so common that it has been termed "sundowning." Solutions tend to vary from person to person, and sometimes from night to night for the same person. One response is to turn up the lights and play music, thereby increasing the amount of stimulation in the environment. Some people need to be taken for a brisk walk outside in order to release their anxiety through exercise. Others become calmer after a hot bath, a back rub, and/or a glass of warm milk.

## ENDLESSLY REPEATED QUESTIONS

Respond to the emotional tone behind the question, rather than to its content. Reassure the person with a touch on her shoulder and affirm that everything has been taken care of. Then, distract the person by switching the conversation to another topic. Reassurance on an emotional level combined with touch may be more effective than facts for soothing feelings of fear or loneliness.

## CONFABULATION: FILLING IN GAPS IN MEMORY WITH INVENTED INFORMATION

People with dementia are not lying when they say things that are not true. They are trying to make sense of circumstances altered by memory loss.

Adapted from: Lustbader and Hooyman, Taking Care of Aging Family Members, Revised Edition, Free Press, 1994