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.