

# Ten Tips for Communicating with a Person with Dementia

Caring for a person with dementia poses many challenges for families and caregivers. People with dementia from conditions such as Alzheimer's and related diseases have a progressive *brain* disorder that makes it more and more difficult for them to remember things, think clearly, communicate with others, or take care of themselves. In addition, dementia can cause mood swings and even change a person's personality and behavior. This fact sheet provides some practical strategies for dealing with the troubling behavior problems and communication difficulties often encountered when caring for a person with dementia.

Improving your communication skills will help make caregiving less stressful and will likely improve the quality of your relationship with your consumer. 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 stronger than your words. Set a positive mood by speaking to your consumer in a pleasant and respectful manner. Use facial expressions, tone of voice, and physical touch when appropriate 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 consumer to reply. 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 consumer 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 consumer 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.

### **Handling Troubling Behavior**

Some of the greatest challenges of caring for a consumer with dementia are the personality and behavior changes that often occur. You can best meet these challenges by using creativity, flexibility, patience and compassion. It also helps to not take things personally and maintain your sense of humor.

To start, consider these ground rules:

**We cannot change the person.** The person you are caring for has a brain disorder that shapes who he has become. When you try to control or change his behavior, you'll most likely be unsuccessful or be met with resistance. It's important to:

- *Try to accommodate the behavior, not control the behavior.* For example, if the person insists on sleeping on the floor, place a mattress on the floor to make him more comfortable.
- *Remember that we can change our behavior or the physical environment.* Changing our own behavior will often result in a change in our consumer's behavior.

**Check with the doctor first.** Behavioral problems may have an underlying medical reason: perhaps the person is in pain or experiencing an adverse side effect from medications. In some cases, like incontinence or hallucinations, there may be some medication or treatment that can assist in managing the problem.

**Behavior has a purpose.** People with dementia typically cannot tell us what they want or need. They might do something, like take all the clothes out of the closet on a daily basis, and we wonder why. It is very likely that the person is fulfilling a need to be busy and productive. *Always consider what need the person might be trying to meet with their behavior – and, when possible, try to accommodate them.*

**Behavior is triggered.** It is important to understand that all behavior is triggered – it doesn’t occur out of the blue. It might be something a person did or said that triggered a behavior or it could be a change in the physical environment. *The root to changing behavior is disrupting the patterns that we create.* Try a different approach, or try a different consequence.

**What works today, may not tomorrow.** The multiple factors that influence troubling behaviors and the natural progression of the disease process means that solutions that are effective today may need to be modified tomorrow – or may no longer work at all. The key to managing difficult behaviors is being creative and flexible in your strategies to address a given issue.

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