

# COMMUNICATION

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION  
DURING ALL STAGES OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE



*Pam M., living with Alzheimer's, and her husband and care partner, Bob L.*

## **COMMUNICATION IS:**

- » How we express our needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge and feelings.
- » A combination of attitude, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language.
- » An important part of our relationships because it's how we relate to one another.
- » More about listening than talking.

## **COMMUNICATION AND DEMENTIA**

The communication skills of a person living with Alzheimer's or another dementia will gradually decline as the disease progresses. Eventually, he or she will have more difficulty expressing thoughts and emotions.

Challenges associated with communication can lead to frustration. However, by understanding what changes may occur, you can prepare, make adjustments and know how to respond, helping to improve communication.



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# **1. CHANGES IN COMMUNICATION**

For individuals living with Alzheimer's, changes in communication vary and are based on the person and how far along he or she has progressed in the disease. Issues you can expect to see throughout the disease progression 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.

# **2. COMMUNICATION IN THE EARLY STAGE**

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

## **Tips for successful communication:**

- » Don't make assumptions about a person's ability to communicate because of an Alzheimer's diagnosis. The disease affects each person differently.
- » Don't exclude the person with the disease from conversations.

- » Speak directly to the person rather than to his or her care partner or companion.
- » Take time to listen to the person express his or her thoughts, feelings and needs.
- » Give the person time to respond. Don't interrupt unless help is requested.
- » Ask what the person is still comfortable doing and what he or she may need help with.
- » Discuss which method of communication is most comfortable. This could include face-to-face conversation, email or phone calls.
- » It's OK to laugh. Sometimes humor lightens the mood and makes communication easier.
- » Don't pull away; your honesty, friendship and support are important to the person.



## **3. COMMUNICATION IN THE MIDDLE STAGE**

The middle stage of Alzheimer's, sometimes referred to as moderate Alzheimer's, is typically the longest and can last for many years. As the disease progresses, the person will have greater difficulty communicating and require more direct care.

### **Tips for successful communication:**

- » Engage the person in one-on-one conversation in a quiet space with minimal distractions.
- » Speak slowly and clearly.
- » Maintain eye contact. It shows you care about what he or she is saying.
- » Give the person plenty of time to respond so he or she can think about what to say.
- » Be patient and offer reassurance. It may encourage the person to explain his or her thoughts.
- » Ask one question at a time.
- » Ask yes or no questions. For example, "Would you like some coffee?" rather than "What would you like to drink?"
- » Avoid criticizing or correcting. Instead, listen and try to find the meaning in what the person says. Repeat what was said to clarify.
- » Avoid arguing. If the person says something you don't agree with, let it be.
- » Offer clear, step-by-step instructions for tasks. Lengthy requests may be overwhelming.
- » Give visual cues. Demonstrate a task to encourage participation.
- » Written notes can be helpful when spoken words seem confusing.

# 4. COMMUNICATION IN THE LATE STAGE

The late stage of Alzheimer's disease, sometimes referred to as severe Alzheimer's, may last from several weeks to several years. As the disease advances, the person in the late stage may rely on nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions or vocal sounds. Around-the-clock care is usually required in this stage.

## Tips for successful communication:

- » Approach the person from the front and identify yourself.
- » Encourage nonverbal communication. If you don't understand what the person is trying to say, ask him or her to point or gesture.
- » Use touch, sights, sounds, smells and tastes as a form of communication with the person.
- » Consider the feelings behind words or sounds. Sometimes the emotions being expressed are more important than what's being said.
- » Treat the person with dignity and respect. Avoid talking down to the person or as if he or she isn't there.
- » It's OK if you don't know what to say; your presence and friendship are most important.

## FIND MORE COMMUNICATION TIPS

Visit [alz.org/commtips](http://alz.org/commtips).



**alz.org/care**

Access reliable information and resources, including:

- » Alzheimer's Navigator® – Assess your needs and create customized action plans.
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- » ALZConnected® – Connect with other caregivers who can relate to your situation.



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