

People with dementia may face many challenges in communicating with others. Here, we share tips on the small but important changes you can make to improve communication.

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How dementia affects communication

Communication is fundamental to our ability to express ourselves, and our relationships with other people.

We communicate not only through our words but also our body language, facial expressions and tone of voice - but people with dementia may have challenges with all of these forms of communication.

They may experience:

- difficulty finding the right words, and sometimes using the wrong word
- difficulty pronouncing words
- muddling words, such as 'aminal' rather than 'animal'
- problems following a conversation, especially in a noisy environment
- difficulty understanding humour or sarcasm
- difficulty reading other people's emotions or understanding their behaviours
- a tendency to repeat themselves
- fluctuating concentration and communication abilities, often caused by tiredness or ill health
- stress caused by struggling to make their views, needs and feelings known

Tips for communicating with a person with dementia

A person with dementia can often understand far more than they can communicate, so always try to involve them in your conversation.

Small changes in your approach can make a big difference. You could try:

- stopping what you're doing and focusing entirely on the person
- limiting distractions
- saying their name when talking to them
- touching their arm, if they feel comfortable with this
- smiling
- speaking slowly, clearly and in short sentences
- using simple and straightforward language
- listening carefully with empathy and understanding
- giving the person plenty of time to answer
- maintaining appropriate eye contact

- being specific - for example, try not to use pronouns such as ‘he’ or ‘she’ when talking about others; use their name instead
- using gestures to act out what you’re saying - for example, by miming drinking a cup of tea or putting on your shoes
- using pictures to explain what you’re saying, such as an image of a car or a photo of where you’re going
- avoiding open-ended questions or offering too many choices
- using visual timetables - where you use photos or images to show what will happen at various times of the day

You could also ask the person’s GP or specialist if a referral to a speech and language therapist might be beneficial.

If the person with dementia seems more confused than usual and is having more trouble communicating, it’s a good idea to visit their GP.

Sometimes, there may be another cause for their confusion, like an infection, constipation, [dehydration](#) or [delirium](#), which could be treated.