

Do's and Don'ts of Communication and Dementia



You can't control memory loss – only your reaction to it.

For people with dementia, their

disability is memory loss. Asking them to remember is like asking a blind person to see. (Common questions like “Did you take your pills?” or “What did you do today?” are the equivalent of asking them to remember something.) A loss of this magnitude reduces the capacity to reason. Expecting them to be reasonable or to accept your conclusion is unrealistic. Don't correct, contradict, blame or insist.

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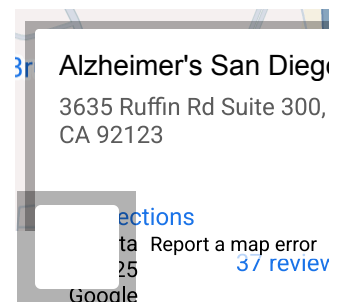
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Reminders are rarely kind. They tell a person how disabled they are – over and over again.

People living with dementia say and do normal things for someone with memory impairment. If they were deliberately trying to exasperate you, they would have a different diagnosis. ***Forgive them... always.*** For example, your wife isn't purposely hiding your favorite pair of shoes. She thinks she's protecting them by putting them in a safe place...and then forgets.

Here are some basic Do's when it comes to communication with someone with dementia:

- Give short, one sentence explanations.
- Allow plenty of time for comprehension, and then triple it.
- Repeat instructions or sentences exactly the same way.
- Avoid insistence. Try again later.
- Agree with them or distract them to a different subject or activity.
- Accept the blame when something's wrong (even if it's fantasy).
- Leave the room, if necessary, to avoid confrontations.
- Respond to the feelings rather than the words.
- Be patient and cheerful and reassuring. Do go with the flow.
- Practice 100% forgiveness. Memory loss progresses daily.

Here are some Don'ts:

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- Don't reason.
- Don't argue.
- Don't confront.
- Don't remind them they forget.
- Don't question recent memory.
- Don't take it personally.

We've put together some specific examples of good and bad communication below, keeping these do's and don'ts in mind. We also have plenty of [tip sheets](#) in various languages regarding more aspects of dementia.

1. **"What doctor's appointment? There's nothing wrong with me."**

Don't: (reason) "You've been seeing the doctor every three months for the last two years. It's written on the calendar and I told you about it yesterday and this morning."

DO: (short explanation) "It's just a regular checkup."

(accept blame) "I'm sorry if I forgot to tell you."

2. **"I didn't write this check for \$500. Someone at the bank is forging my signature."**

Don't: (argue) "What? Don't be silly! The bank wouldn't be forging your signature."

DO: (respond to feelings) "That's a scary thought."

(reassure) "I'll make sure they don't do that."

(distract) "Would you help me fold the towels?"

3. **"Nobody's going to make decisions for me. You can go now...and don't come back!"**

Don't: (confront) "I'm not going anywhere and



you can't remember enough to make your own decisions."

DO: (accept blame or respond to feelings) "I'm sorry this is a tough time."

(reassure) "I love you and we're going to get through this together."

(distract) "You know what? Don has a new job. He's really excited about it."

4. **"Joe hasn't called for a long time. I hope he's okay."**

Don't: (remind) "Joe called yesterday and you talked with him for 15 minutes."

DO: (reassure) "You really like talking with him don't you?"

(distract) "Let's call him when we get back from our walk."

5. **"Hello, Mary. I see you've brought a friend with you."**

Don't: (question memory) "Hi Mom. You remember Eric, don't you? What did you do today?"

DO: (short explanation) "Hi Mom. You look wonderful! This is Eric. We work together."

6. **"Who are you? Where's my husband?"**

Don't: (take it personally) "What do you mean – who's your husband?" I am!"

DO: (go with the flow, reassure) "He'll be here for dinner."

(distract) "How about some milk and cookies?... Would you like chocolate chip or oatmeal?"

7. **"I'm going to the store for a newspaper."**

Don't: (repeat differently) "Please put your



shoes on.”...You’ll need to put your shoes on.”

DO: (repeat exactly) “Please put your shoes on.”... “Please put your shoes on.”

8. “I don’t want to eat this! I hate chicken.”

Don’t: (respond negatively) “You just told me you wanted chicken. I’m not making you anything else, so you better eat it!”

Do: (accept blame) “I’m so sorry, I forgot. I was in such a rush that it slipped my mind.

(respond positively) Let me see what else we have available.” Leave the room and try again.

*Need support? We’re here to help! Call us at **858.492.4400** to speak with our **dementia team** who is here to help San Diego County residents and/or those caring for someone living in San Diego County (Spanish speakers available). Check out our free **education classes, social activities, caregiver support groups, & more** – as well as our **Spanish services**.*

RECOMMENDED: Why do people living with memory loss repeat things?

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