



One of the many challenges facing families and friends of persons with dementia is developing effective ways to communicate and stay engaged with their loved one. As cognitive and functional capacities decline, associated changes in thinking, behavior, and personality require new approaches to communication. Consider the following ten communication tips to nurture your relationships and foster wellbeing for your loved one living with dementia:

INTRODUCE YOURSELF WHEN SAYING HELLO

It can be challenging to remember names and faces, especially in unfamiliar settings. Include your name and a point of reference in your greeting. For example, “Hi Alice, it’s Joanne. I’m a friend of your daughter.” Or “Hi John, it’s cousin Chris.” If the person doesn’t recognize you or behaves in an unexpected way, don’t take it

personally. Casually move on with conversation to provide comfort to all parties present.

COMMUNICATE AT EYE LEVEL

Peripheral vision can be diminished for a person with dementia. Position yourself in front of the person so he/she can clearly see you. Sit, take a knee, or stoop if they are sitting to show that you are focused on them. Be sure to have their attention before you begin conversations. Look at the person while you speak.

SPEAK IN A CLEAR AND CALM VOICE, DIRECTLY TO THE PERSON

The way that you speak makes an impact. Be mindful of the tone of your voice to ensure you are age appropriate and calming. Refrain from referring to someone in third person language or talking around them. Even if communication is severely impaired, still speak in ways that are respectful and inclusive.

MINIMIZE BACKGROUND NOISE & DISTRACTIONS

Environmental stimuli impact both brain and physical stamina. Be mindful of fatigue and its effect on thinking and behavior. Make it as easy as possible to focus on the activity at hand. One topic, one instruction, one person talking at a time.

USE SIMPLE, SHORT SENTENCES, IMAGES, AND/OR GESTURES

It can be difficult to process complex information. Use short sentences and visual cues, such as pictures, gestures, or written words to clarify communication. If word finding is difficult, suggest a word that seems to fit the context. Patiently encourage the person to point or gesture if difficulties persist.

PAY ATTENTION TO BODY LANGUAGE

Facial expressions, posture, and mannerisms can indicate hunger, toilet needs, or discomfort. Pay attention to these nonverbal cues to better understand needs and interests. Learn to identify triggers and patterns in behaviors so you can minimize distress and challenging behavior.

LISTEN PATIENTLY

Cognitive difficulties require added time to speak and process information. Refrain from rushing, interrupting, or talking over a person. Avoid correcting mistakes. Learn to replace the word “don’t” with “let’s see how this works” or “Let’s try such and such.” Help them anticipate next steps by providing verbal direction. Use praise along the way.

KEEP COMMUNICATION POSITIVE

Calm emotions support optimal interactions and functioning. If you are asked about a situation or individual that may cause alarm or heightened emotions, focus on the positive and shift conversations to another topic. If he/she becomes upset or concerned, validate their feelings and gently redirect them to another activity.

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ACCEPT THEIR REALITY

Engaging in ways that make sense to the person supports ongoing interaction. For example, if he or she is painting a picture and wants to paint the sky green or you’re playing a game of dominos and they choose to stack the game tiles instead of matching them, so be it. Accept their personal choice and engage accordingly.

BE PRESENT

A person with dementia may not remember the specific activity or the person they encountered, but the feelings that were imparted will remain. Carve intentional time to create and share positive emotions that impact wellbeing. Feelings shared will linger throughout their day.

According to the World Health Organization¹, “Although dementia mainly affects older people, it is not a normal part of aging. Worldwide, around 50 million people have dementia, and there are nearly 10 million new cases every year. Alzheimer disease is the most common form of dementia and may contribute to 60–70% of cases.” Expanding your knowledge and skills in communicating with people with dementia will help your loved one and future generations. Embrace your ability to make a difference during tender times of transition. Your presence and engagement matters.



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¹ World Health Organization. Health Topics. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/dementia>