

communication

Best ways to interact with a
person with dementia





communication and dementia

Alzheimer's disease and related dementias can gradually diminish a person's ability to communicate. Not only do people with dementia have more difficulty expressing thoughts and emotions, they also have more trouble understanding others. The ability to exchange our ideas, wishes and feelings is a basic need.

Communication is:

- Sending and receiving messages.
- How we relate to each other.
- An important part of our relationships.
- A way to express who we are.
- More than talking and listening.
- About attitude, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language.

Changes in communication

Changes in the ability to communicate are unique to each person. A caregiver may recognize differences in the person with dementia such as:

- Difficulty finding the right words.
- Using familiar words repeatedly.
- Inventing new words to describe familiar things.
- Easily losing train of thought.
- Difficulty organizing words logically.
- Reverting to speaking in a native language.
- Using curse words.
- Speaking less often.
- Relying on gestures more than speaking.

A number of physical conditions and medications can affect a person's ability to communicate. Consult your doctor when you notice major changes.

The Alzheimer's Association recommends ways to better communicate with a person with dementia. Inside, you'll find tips for the following:

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1. helping a person communicate

Communicating with a person with dementia requires patience and understanding. Above all, you must be a good listener.

To help a person communicate:

Be patient and supportive

Let the person know you're listening and trying to understand what is being said.

Show your interest

Keep good eye contact. Show the person that you care about what he or she is saying.

Offer comfort and reassurance

If he or she is having trouble communicating, let the person know that it's OK. Encourage the person to continue to explain his or her thoughts.

Give the person time

Let the person think about and describe whatever he or she wants. Be careful not to interrupt.

Avoid criticizing or correcting

Don't tell the person what he or she is saying is incorrect. Instead, listen and try to find the meaning in what is being said. Repeat what was said if it helps to clarify the thought.

Avoid arguing

If the person says something you don't agree with, let it be. Arguing usually only makes things worse.

Offer a guess

If the person uses the wrong word or cannot find a word, try guessing the right one. If you understand what the person means, you may not need to give the correct word. Be careful not to cause unnecessary frustration.



Encourage unspoken communication

If you don't understand what is being said, ask the person to point or gesture.

Limit distractions

Find a place that's quiet so you won't be interrupted. The surroundings should support the person's ability to focus on his or her thoughts.

Focus on feelings, not facts

Sometimes the emotions being expressed are more important than what is being said. Look for the feelings behind the words. At times, tone of voice and other actions may provide clues.



2. best ways for you to communicate

As dementia progresses, communication can become more and more challenging. Sensitive, ongoing communication is important, no matter how difficult it may become or how confused the person may be.

While a person with dementia may not always respond, he or she still requires and benefits from continued communication. When communicating with him or her, it's especially important to choose your words carefully.

To best communicate:

Identify yourself

Approach the person from the front. Tell the person who you are.

Call the person by name

This is not only courteous, it also helps orient the person and gets his or her attention.

Use short, simple words and sentences

Don't overwhelm the person with lengthy requests or stories. Speak in a concise manner. Keep to the point. In some cases, slang words may be helpful.

Speak slowly and clearly

Be aware of speed and clarity when speaking.

Give one-step directions

Break down tasks and instructions into clear, simple steps. Give one step at a time.

Ask one question at a time

Don't overwhelm or confuse the person with too many questions at once.

Patiently wait for a response

The person may need extra time to process what you said. Give the person the time and encouragement he or she needs to respond.

Repeat information or questions

If the person doesn't respond, wait a moment. Then ask again. Ask the question in the same way, using the same words as before.

Turn questions into answers

Try providing the solution rather than the question. For example, say "The bathroom is right here," instead of asking, "Do you need to use the bathroom?"

Avoid confusing expressions

If you tell the person to “Hop in!” he or she may take that as a literal instruction. Describe the action directly to prevent confusion. “Please come here. Your shower is ready.”

Avoid vague statements

Instead of saying “Here it is!” try saying, “Here is your hat.”

Emphasize key words

Stress the words in a sentence that you want to draw attention to, like “Here is *your coffee*.”

Turn negatives into positives

Instead of saying, “Don't go there,” say, “Let's go here.”

Give visual cues

To help demonstrate the task, point or touch the item you want the individual to use. Or, begin the task for the person.

Avoid quizzing

Reminiscing may be healthy, but avoid asking, “Do you remember when ... ?” Refrain from saying things like, “You should know who that is.”

Give simple explanations

Avoid using complex logic and reasoning. Instead give clear and concise responses.

Write things down

Try using written notes as reminders, if the person is able to understand them. A written response may also help when a spoken one seems too confusing.

Treat the person with dignity and respect

Avoid talking down to the person or talking as if he or she isn't there.



Be aware of your tone of voice

- Speak slowly and distinctly.
- Use a gentle and relaxed tone — a lower pitch is more calming.
- Convey an easygoing, non-demanding manner of speaking.
- Be aware of your feelings and attitude — you may be communicating through your tone of voice, even when you don't mean to.

Pay special attention to your body language

- Always approach the person from the front.
- Avoid sudden movements.
- Keep good eye contact; if the person is seated or reclining, get down to that level.
- Be aware of your stance to avoid sending a negative message.
- Use positive, friendly facial expressions.
- Use nonverbal communication like pointing, gesturing or touching.



3. people with hearing limitations

If the person has difficulty hearing:

- Approach the person from the front.
- Speak to him or her face to face.
- Get the person's attention by saying his or her name, and give a gentle touch.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Use a lower tone of voice.
- Use nonverbal communication like pointing, gesturing or touching.
- Write things down, if needed.
- If he or she has a hearing aid, encourage the person to wear it. Check the battery often.

4. people with vision limitations

If the person has difficulty seeing:

- Avoid startling the person with loud noises or sudden movements.
- Identify yourself as you approach the person.
- Tell the person of your intentions before you begin.
- Use large-print or audiotape materials, if available.
- If he or she has glasses, encourage the person to wear them. Keep them clean and have the prescription checked regularly.



10 quick tips better communication

- 1 Be calm and supportive.
- 2 Focus on feelings, not facts.
- 3 Pay attention to tone of voice.
- 4 Address the person by his or her name.
- 5 Speak slowly, and use short, simple words.
- 6 Ask one question at a time.
- 7 Avoid vague words and negative statements.
- 8 Don't talk about the person as if he or she isn't there.
- 9 Use nonverbal communication, like pointing or gesturing.
- 10 Be patient, flexible and understanding.

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The Alzheimer's Association is the world's leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer's care, support and research. Our mission is to eliminate Alzheimer's disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health.

Our vision is a world without Alzheimer's®.

For information and support,
contact the Alzheimer's Association:

800.272.3900
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