

Adult Day Caregiver Connection



Spring/Summer 2025

Creative Communication Techniques

How to comfort, ease stress and meet individuals with dementia and other cognitive impairments in their reality.

Some effective ways to communicate with individuals who have dementia can be by speaking slowly, using simple words and sentences, giving them time to respond, and avoiding overwhelming them. Use positive instructions, validation techniques, and redirection to address their feelings and calm them.

Use simple words and sentences

Speak slowly, distinctly, and in a reassuring tone. Refrain from raising your voice higher or louder; instead, pitch your voice lower. Not every person with dementia has a hearing impairment, and using a loud tone can make them feel like you are yelling at them. Use a clear, normal tone of voice to start a conversation. If they don't understand the first time, use the same wording to repeat your message or question. If they still don't understand, wait a few minutes and rephrase the question.

If the person doesn't respond, or you become aware that they have a hearing problem, then increase your volume.

Avoid slang or figures of speech

As dementia progresses, it can become harder for someone to understand what you're trying to tell them. For example, telling a loved one with Alzheimer's disease that it's "no use crying over spilled milk" might result in them looking to see where the milk has spilled, rather than comforting or encouraging them not to focus on a past problem.

Ask simple, answerable questions

Limit your questions to just a few. Ask one question at a time; those with yes or no answers work best. Refrain from asking open-ended questions or giving too many choices. If possible, show them the choices—visual prompts and cues also help clarify your question and can guide their response.

Give them a chance to respond. If they are struggling, it's okay to suggest words. Watch for non-verbal clues and body language and respond appropriately. Also, don't talk about the person as if they're not there. They may understand more than you give them credit for, so convey your respect by addressing them directly.

Break down activities into a series of steps and keep it simple

You can encourage your loved one to do what they can, gently remind them of steps they tend to forget, and assist with steps they are no longer able to accomplish on their own. Also, use simple words and short sentences.

Use gentle touch

While some people might get defensive if you break their bubble of personal space around them, many appreciate a gentle touch. Knowing how someone responds to physical touch is important. You might want to give a little pat on the shoulders or hold their hand as you talk with them. Personal touch is important and can be an effective way to communicate that you care.

Your attitude and body language communicate your feelings and thoughts more strongly than your words do. Set a positive mood by using facial expressions, tone of voice, and light physical touch to help convey your message and show your feelings of affection.

People with dementia often feel confused, anxious, and unsure of themselves. They also often get reality confused and may recall things that never really occurred. Avoid trying to convince them they are wrong.

Stay focused on the feelings they are demonstrating (which are real) and respond with verbal and physical expressions of comfort, support, and reassurance. Sometimes holding hands, touching, hugging, and praise will get the person to respond when all else fails.

Listen with your ears, eyes, and heart

A genuine smile can reduce the chance of challenging behaviors since the person may feel reassured by your non-verbal communication. Your warm smile and eye contact convey that you are glad to be with them. Always strive to listen for the meaning and feelings that underlie the words.

Limit distractions and noise—turn off the radio or TV, close the curtains or shut the door, or move to quieter surroundings. Before speaking, make sure you have their attention; address them by name, identify yourself by name and relation, and use nonverbal cues and touch to help keep them focused. If they are seated, get down to their level and maintain eye contact.

Distract and redirect

If your loved one becomes upset or agitated, try changing the subject or the environment. For example, ask them for help or suggest going for a walk. It is important to connect with the person on a feeling level, before you redirect.

Remembering the past is often a soothing and affirming activity. Many people with dementia may not remember what happened 45 minutes ago, but they can clearly recall their lives 45 years earlier. Therefore, avoid asking questions that rely on short-term memory. Instead, try asking general questions about the person’s distant past as this information is more likely to be retained.

Use humor whenever possible, though not at the person’s expense. People with dementia tend to retain their social skills and are usually delighted to laugh along with you.

Lying to a loved one can take a toll on a caregiver, and even people with short-term memory loss might be able to sense a lie. It is best to only use this method when it can give a loved one a sense of calm and comfort.

Improving your communication skills will help make caregiving less stressful and will help improve the quality of your relationship with your loved one. Good communication skills will also enhance your ability to handle any difficult behavior you may encounter as you care for your loved one.

Do's and Don'ts: Communicating with a Person Who Has Alzheimer's Disease

People with Alzheimer's may struggle to find the right word when speaking and may forget what they were saying. Remember to be patient. Here are some do's and don'ts to keep in mind.



Do	Don't
✔ Make eye contact and use the person's name.	✘ Exclude the person from conversations.
✔ Listen and be open to the person's concerns.	✘ Speak with an angry or tense tone.
✔ Allow extra time for the person to respond.	✘ Talk about the person as if they are not there.
✔ Try using different words if the person doesn't understand what you say the first time.	✘ Interrupt or argue with the person.
✔ Ask yes or no questions: "Would you like some tea?" rather than "What would you like to drink?"	✘ Ask the person whether they remember something or someone.

To learn more about communication and behavior changes in Alzheimer's disease, visit www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers-communication.

