

Communicating

We all need to communicate with other people. Communicating our needs, wishes and feelings is vital - not only to improve our quality of life, but also to preserve our sense of identity. As a carer, it's important to encourage the person with dementia to communicate in whichever way works best for them.

We tend to think of communication as talking, but in fact it consists of much more than that. As much as 90 per cent of our communication takes place through non-verbal communication such as gestures, facial expressions and touch.

- Non-verbal communication is particularly important for a person with dementia who is losing their language skills.
- When a person with dementia behaves in ways that cause problems for their carer, they may be trying to communicate something.

Dementia and language

An early sign that someone's language is being affected by dementia is that they can't find the right words - particularly the names of objects. They may substitute an incorrect word, or they may not find any word at all.

There may come a time when the person can hardly communicate in language at all. Not only will they be unable to find the words of objects, they may even forget your name. People with dementia often confuse the generations - mistaking their wife for their mother, for example. This may be very distressing for you as the carer, but it's a natural aspect of their memory loss.

The person you are caring for may be trying to interpret a world that no longer makes sense to them because their brain is interpreting information incorrectly. Sometimes you and the person with dementia will misinterpret each other's attempts at communication. These misunderstandings can be distressing, and you may need some support.

Difficulties with communication can be distressing and frustrating for the person with dementia and for you as a carer. But there are lots of ways to help make sure that you understand each other.

Communicating with someone with dementia - tips

- Listen carefully to what they have to say.
- Make sure you have their full attention before you speak.
- Pay attention to body language.
- Speak clearly
- Think about how things appear in the person with dementia's reality.

- Consider whether any other factors are affecting their communication.
- Use physical contact to reassure.
- Show them respect.

Listening skills

- Try to listen carefully to what the person is saying and give them plenty of encouragement.
- If they have difficulty finding the right word or finishing a sentence, ask them to explain in a different way. Listen out for clues.
- If their speech is hard to understand, use what you know about them to interpret what they might be trying to say. But always check back with them to see if you are right - it's infuriating to have your sentence finished incorrectly by someone else!
- If the other person is feeling sad, let them express their feelings without trying to 'jolly them along'. Sometimes the best thing to do is to just listen, and show them that you care.

Getting their attention

- Try to catch and hold the attention of the person before you start to communicate.
- Make sure they can see you clearly.
- Make eye contact. This will help them focus on you.
- Try to minimise competing noises, such as the radio, TV, or other people's conversation.

Using body language

A person with dementia will read your body language. Agitated movements or a tense facial expression may upset them and can make communication more difficult.

- Be calm and still while you communicate. This shows the person that you are giving them your full attention, and that you have time for them.
- Try to find ways to relax so that your body language communicates confidence and reassurance.
- If words fail the person, pick up cues from their body language. The expression on their face and the way they hold themselves and move about can give you clear signals about how they are feeling.

Speaking clearly

- As the dementia progresses, the person will become less able to start a conversation, so you may have to start taking the initiative.

- Speak clearly and calmly. Avoid speaking sharply or raising your voice as this may distress the person, even if they can't follow the sense of your words.
- Use simple, short sentences.
- Processing information will take the person longer than it used to - so allow them enough time. If you try to hurry them, they may feel pressured.
- Avoid asking direct questions. People with dementia can become frustrated if they can't find the answer, and they may respond with irritation or even aggression. If you have to, ask questions one at a time and phrase them in a way that allows for a 'yes' or 'no' answer.
- Try not to ask the person to make complicated decisions. Too many choices can be confusing and frustrating.
- If the person doesn't understand what you are saying, try getting the message across in a different way rather than simply repeating the same thing.
- Humour can help to bring you closer together and is a great pressure valve. Try to laugh together about misunderstandings and mistakes - it can help.

Whose reality?

Fact and fantasy can become confused as dementia progresses. If the person says something you know isn't true, try to find ways around the situation rather than responding with a flat contradiction.

- If they say, 'We must leave now - mother is waiting for me', you might reply, 'Your mother used to wait for you, didn't she?'
- Always avoid making the person with dementia feel foolish in front of other people.

Other causes

As well as dementia, communication can be affected by:

- Pain, discomfort, illness or the side-effects of medication. If you suspect this might be happening, talk to the GP at once.
- Problems with sight, hearing or ill-fitting dentures. Make sure the person's glasses are the correct prescription, that their hearing aids are working properly, and that their dentures fit well and are comfortable.

Physical contact

Even when conversation becomes more difficult, affection can help you and the person you're caring for to remain close.

- Communicate your care and affection by the tone of your voice and the touch of your hand.
- Don't underestimate the reassurance you can give by holding the person's hand, or putting your arm around them, if it feels right.

Show respect

- Make sure no one speaks down to the person with dementia or treats them like a child, even if they don't seem to understand what people say. No one likes being patronised.
- Try to include the person in conversations with others. You may find this easier if you adapt the way you say things slightly. Being included in social groups can help a person with dementia to preserve their fragile sense of their own identity. It also helps to protect them from the overwhelming feelings of exclusion and isolation.
- If you are getting little response from the person, it can be very tempting to speak about them as if they weren't there. But disregarding them in this way can make them feel very cut off, frustrated and sad.

Carers' advice sheet 500

Last updated: June 2005

Last reviewed: June 2005