



Empowerment Tools for Better Communication and Understanding

Dementia gradually diminishes a person's ability to communicate. They have more difficulty expressing thoughts and emotions, and have more trouble understanding others. Here are some ways to help you better communicate with a person with dementia.

TIPS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

1. **Eye contact is always best!** Position yourself on their level and establish direct eye contact. Speak calmly in a normal tone of voice. A gentle hand touch can be an effective tool for engaging with a person with dementia.
2. **Listen with understanding and interest.** We all want to be heard, cared for and validated. When we show others our authentic selves, we connect with them on a personal level. Remember they have feelings, and while they may not be able to express them as they once did, who they are and how they feel are very real.
3. **Limit your conversations to short, simple sentences.** A person with dementia will often shut down when they are given too much information. Their brain cannot process communications like they used to. Slow down, give them time to process and respond back.
4. **Never ever argue!** A person with dementia does not have the same reality that you do. Their world has changed. It's your job, as their care partner, to creatively step into their world with empathy, understanding and love. Remember that they are not acting this way on purpose.
5. **Reminisce.** Persons with dementia usually recall memories from long ago. They often find security and peace by sharing old memories and life stories.

Challenging Expressions of Need

As dementia progresses a person may have difficulty expressing what they need. When this happens, behavior may become a means of communicating. The unpredictability of these changes in behavior can be stressful for caregivers. Anticipating behavior changes and understanding the root cause can be extremely helpful in learning to navigate them.

Tips for understanding challenging expressions of need

1. **Ask questions.** There are many causes for behavior. Ask yourself why your care receiver is behaving this way. Is their agitation an expression of pain? Is their reduced appetite due to ill-fitting dentures? Back up to what was happening just before the behavior – this may hold the clue to what the behavior means.
2. **Look for a pattern.** Talk with other members of your care team (including family) and see if you can observe a pattern related to the behavior. Look at circumstances surrounding the behavior. Does it happen at the same time of day or in the same situation?
3. **Be positive.** Behavior that is met with a positive response will generally be repeated. Don't be condescending, but rather encouraging. We all like to feel that something we do is appreciated and done well.
4. **Look at your nonverbal communication.** People with dementia can be sensitive to changes in facial expression, posture, mood or tone of voice. They can feel your stress and your impatience. If you have a difficult time with a person, take a minute to assess what message your face, your mood and your body position may be communicating.
5. **Smile!** We've heard it a hundred times, but a smile can go a long way. The times when your smile may make the biggest difference in behavioral change is when it's the most challenging to do. So, take a deep breath, count to 3, smile and be positive.
6. **Validate, join and distract.** One effective method for managing a challenging behavior is to connect with their emotion, then calmly and gently redirect the conversation or activity. If, for instance, they insist on wanting to leave, your response might be "I know you miss your daughter. I see these pictures of her. Can you show me your beautiful family?" And redirect them to the family photo album.
7. **Step back when necessary.** Aggressive behavior is often spontaneous and may take some time to get to the root cause. Never argue or be assertive back. The safety of both you and your care receiver is always a priority. This may be when you need to pause, take a breath and ask for someone else to take over while you step out of the situation for a moment. Patience and calm must be the foundation of a care partner's response.