

Communication with a Person who has Alzheimer's Disease

Prepared by Tonia Vojtkofsky, Psy.D.

People with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia often become confused and have difficulty communicating. They may struggle to find the right words to express themselves, or may forget the meaning of words and phrases. It is common for them to rely on gestures or use behaviors to communicate, especially as verbal skills decline. There are several strategies you can use to improve communication with persons who have Alzheimer's disease.



- **Gain the person's attention.** Gain the listener's attention before you begin talking. Approach the person from the front, identify yourself, and call him or her by name.
- **Maintain eye contact.** Visual communication is very important. Facial expressions and body language add vital information to the communication. For example, you are able to "see" a person's anger, frustration, excitement, or lack of comprehension by watching the expression on his or her face.
- **Be attentive.** Show that you are listening and trying to understand what is being said. Use a gentle and relaxed tone of voice, as well as friendly facial expressions.
- **Speak naturally.** Speak at a normal rate, not too fast or too slow. Use pauses to give the person time to process what you're saying. Use short, simple, and familiar words, but 'baby talk' and shouting are not needed. Remember that just because a person has dementia doesn't mean he/she is deaf or dumb.
- **Keep it simple.** Give one-step directions. Ask only one question at a time.
- **Be patient.** Encourage the person to continue trying to express his or her thoughts, even if he or she is having difficulty. Be careful not to interrupt and avoid criticizing or correcting.
- **Be positive.** Instead of saying, "Don't do that," say, "Let's try this." Joining with the person builds rapport, as he or she will emotionally feel your desire to connect.
- **Be sensitive** to the person's limited comprehension and understanding. Otherwise the person can have a catastrophic reaction and start yelling, crying or striking out.
- **Don't argue or confront.** Since reasoning and insight are lost, there is no benefit in trying to reason or argue with persons who have dementia.
- **Enter the person's reality.** For example, if the person believes it's the year 1952 and he or she is a 30-year-old farmer, then talk about farming or a related topic. Validate feelings to comfort the person. Imagine how scary it would be if someone told you it was not the year you believe it is.
- **Identify the emotional meaning behind the person's words.** Even if the person's words are incoherent, there is an emotional message that the individual is trying to convey. Reflect that emotion back to the person.
- **Watch the person's body language.** Try to understand the person's gestures and the behaviors being used to communicate. All behavior has meaning and becomes a means of non-verbal communication for persons losing their verbal abilities.

For more information about dementia care or Alzheimer's Family Services Center, a member of the Hoag Neurosciences Institute, contact us at 714-593-9630.



9451 Indianapolis Ave. ♥ Huntington Beach, CA 92646 (714) 593-9630 ♥ (714) 593-9632 fax ♥ www.AFSCenter.org

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