

# LEARNING TO SPEAK “ALZHEIMER’S”

## Effective Communication Strategies in Dementia Care

Alzheimer's disease and related dementias/disorders (ADRD) gradually diminish a person's ability to communicate. Communication with a person with Alzheimer's requires patience, understanding and good listening skills.

# Communication

Understand that communication skills is one of the first areas affected by Alzheimer's – not only comprehension but language, as well. A person often has trouble locating words or phrases to communicate her thoughts. She has trouble following a conversation, many times because she can't recall what was said just a few minutes ago.

# IMPORTANT NOTE

**EVERY “behavior” is a form of communication!**

# Strategies for Communicating with Persons with ADRD

- Orientation
- Validation
- Redirection
- Simple sentences/questions
- Memory Cuing

# Orientation

- Identify yourself
- Approach the person quietly and slowly from the front and say who you are
- Keep eye contact; if the person is seated or reclined, approach them at eye level
- Call the person by name as this helps to get her attention
- Speak slowly

# Validation

- Often a person believes that she is living in a different time or place
- This is HER reality
- “Validate” this whenever possible by entering her reality
- This approach conveys safety in her surroundings
- You will never convince her that what she “believes” is not true
- Ask questions about the time and/or place she thinks she is in
- Don’t feel guilty about “lies”

# Redirection

- Don't contradict a person or argue with her – you will never win an argument with a person with Alzheimer's!
- Use creative ways to “redirect” the conversation to a topic that she can understand
- Bring up happy memories that you know she will connect with
- Since her short-term memory is impaired, changing the subject gently is often the best course of action to take

# Simple sentences/questions

- Always use easy to understand words and short, simple sentences
- Avoid asking several questions at once
- Avoid asking questions that require difficult decision-making

# Memory Cuing

- Use words, photographs or music to help cue memories
- Use gestures or prompts to help get her point across
- Place reminder notes for help in completing tasks
  - Color code
  - Number things in the order in which they should be done
- Lay out clothes in the order they should be put on
- Point or touch the item you want her to use
- Begin the task for her and ask for her assistance

# Nov-verbal Communication

- Non-verbal behaviors are a primary source of communication
- Looks, head nods, body positioning and posture, gestures, facial expressions and even breathing contribute to the relationship and communication between caregiver and person with Alzheimer's

# Tips to improve communication through non-verbal methods

- Limit distractions
- Face the person and be at their eye level
- Use simple gestures
- “Listen” with your eyes
- When she uses non-verbal cues, show that you understand
- If you don't understand, prompt her gently until you do
- Observe breathing to help predict emotional responses
- Look for permission to touch the person to help soothe her
- Remain calm

## Remember:

The person with Alzheimer's can often understand even the slightest of non-verbal cues on your part. If YOU are frustrated, SHE might become frustrated and exhibit negative emotional or behavioral patterns.

# Types of non-verbal communication

- Eye contact
- Touch
- Body Language

# Cultural/language differences

- Understand diversity of a person and her family
- Familiarize yourself with a person's culture and background
- If there is a language barrier, try to learn simple words and phrases in her native language to help communicate with her
- It is important to learn how the person views family and healthcare from the perspective of her ethnicity and culture
- Don't assume that all people from one country, religion or background have the same cultural principles
- Get to know the person through her family, if possible
- Diversity also applies to sexual orientation
- Above all else, be respectful of the person and her diversities

# Strategies for Communicating with Families

- Reframing is changing the way people see things and coming up with alternative and creative ways of viewing a situation.
  - Provide education about the disease and what to expect
  - Talk to the family
  - Recommend support groups
- Understand the family dynamic

# Remember:

It is important to show respect and concern, but NEVER insert yourself into this family dynamic – no matter how difficult it becomes. You will never be a part of the family, nor will you completely understand what they are going through. If the situation seems unbearable to the family, encourage them to consult a social worker or other professional that can offer help.

# Cultural/language differences

According to the Alzheimer's Association:

- Understand linguistic, economic and social barriers that individuals from different cultures face, preventing access to healthcare and social services. Try to provide services in a family's native language.
- Understand that families from different cultures consider and use alternatives to Western healthcare philosophy and practice.
- Cultivate relationships with families over time.
- Consider the family's background and experience in determining what services are appropriate.
- Consider the culture's typical perceptions of aging, caring for elderly family members and memory impairment. Understand that a family's culture impacts their choices regarding ethical issues, such as artificial nutrition, life support and autopsies.
- Regard the faith community for various cultures as a critical support system.

# In summary:

- Be patient
  - with the person with Alzheimer's
  - With her family
  - with yourself
- Be supportive
- Offer reassurance
- Be kind and never argue
- Speak in a slow, soft manner
- Use unspoken communication
  - touch an item
  - look her in the eye, respectfully
  - gesture to describe something

# In Summary (Continued):

- Help her focus by providing a quiet environment that doesn't create distractions.
- If she becomes frustrated trying to understand you or communicate with you, show her that you care about her and what she is trying to say; try not to interrupt her.
- Focus on the fact that sometimes the emotions behind the words are more important than what is being said; try to understand the feelings behind the words.
- Remember that a person with Alzheimer's often has difficulty expressing her thoughts and emotions; she also has more trouble understanding others.

**REMEMBER**

**EVERY “behavior” is a form of  
communication!**

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