

Important Point

Effective communication strategies are key to providing good dementia care.

Successful communication comes down to four key points. Let's have a closer look:

Start the interaction in a conversational manner:

At the core of all of us is a need to be social. People living with dementia have a need for relational connectedness just as much as we do. However, due to the progressive loss of language associated with dementia, the ability to socially relate to people becomes more difficult. Keep in mind, when you are caring for a client with dementia, try to remain relational focused while providing care. Engage them in conversation or reminisce while you are assisting with bathing, dressing, etc.



- 1. Approach from the front:** Always approach the person slowly and from the front. Give them a chance to see you coming their way. Call them by their preferred name. Don't assume everyone will want to be called, "Dear...Honey...Sweetie...Grandpa", etc.
- 2. Eye Contact:** Caregivers need to look the person in the eye and make sure they have their attention before beginning to speak. Being at eye level when speaking and maintaining eye contact throughout the conversation will help to hold the person's attention.
- 3. Always identify yourself:** You may have just seen the person yesterday, or even earlier in the day. Remember that the person with dementia has difficulty with remembering recent events and may not remember or recognize you. Reminding the person who you are, and why you are there will help to reduce anxiety.
- 4. Begin conversation in a social way:** Encouraging a person with dementia to do certain tasks will be more successful if they trust you first. Instead of trying to rush the person into an activity be patient, allow them time to respond, and spend a little time talking about familiar topics. For example, talk about what they are wearing or the flowers in the vase. Once you sense they are more comfortable with you, you can change the subject to the task at hand.
- 5. Avoid distractions:** Background noise from televisions, radios, or other conversations can be very distracting and confusing for the person with dementia. Find a quiet, relaxing place to talk.

Simplify What You Say

Simplifying your speech does not involve speaking to the individual as though they were a child nor does it mean speaking at an excessively slow rate. Rather, it is about being clear which enables the person with dementia to have greater success with conversation.



- 1. Ask simple questions that require a 'yes' or 'no' answer:** Open-ended questions ("What do you want for lunch?") may be very difficult for the person with dementia. A simpler question ("Would you like a tuna sandwich for lunch?") will help avoid confusion.
- 2. Speak clearly and use short, simple sentences:** People with dementia have difficulty with processing information and can get frustrated by fast paced conversation and complex sentences. Frequent pauses allow the person time to understand what is being said and to respond.
- 3. Rephrase your sentences:** If you notice that your client with dementia does not understand you, try rephrasing your sentence. Also:
 - Be sure you allow enough time for them to process
 - Use visual cues – pictures, signs, objects to provide context
 - Try demonstrating what you are saying
 - Keep the words and phrases concrete. Some abstract or slang expressions may be taken literally like, "Take a load off" or "Here, you give it a shot".
 - Stay calm and patient
- 4. Provide Choices:** Include your clients in a task by allowing them to make their own choices. This supports their dignity and allows them to feel a sense of control. Even such basic choices as whether to wear the blue dress or the red dress, whether to eat a banana or an orange, or whether or not to have a bath gives the person a feeling of control over their life. If you see signs that the person is having difficulty, limit the options to two, or ask the question differently so that they may answer "yes" or "no" to a single choice.

Check Your Approach

Without realizing it, we can contribute to a communication breakdown by being unaware of how our tone, body language, or facial expression influences our message. If one approach with a client doesn't work, be flexible. Stop what you are doing and try it again with a different approach.



- 1. Suggest. Limit the use of phrases like "it's time to..." or "you need to...".** Even though the caregiver's intent is positive, this type of language tends to make the person feel like they are being told what to do. These phrases may give the person the feeling that conversation is only about getting them to do something.

- 2. Use positive vs. negative statements:** It's always preferable to tell the person what you would like them to do as opposed to what you do not want them to do. For example, "Don't go outside today" (negative) sounds like an order. "Let's stay inside today and look at photos" (positive) has a more suggestive tone. First, most people become defensive when told they cannot do something, and second, it helps them to know what they **can** do.
- 3. Verbal and non-verbal message:** Be sure that your non-verbal and verbal messages match. Don't try to sound empathetic and concerned with your hands are on your hips while looking impatient. Ensure your words are spoken in a calm, soothing tone of voice that is respectful and elder friendly. Be sure you give your full attention. Avoid multitasking and conversing at the same time.
- 1. Ask permission:** Show respect by asking the client's permission before carrying through with a task or moving personal items. "Can I help you into the washroom for a bath?"

Be Supportive

For client's with dementia, the experience can be both frustrating and frightening. A supportive approach which offers reassurance and compassion can help ease the many challenges of living with this condition.



- 1. Be sure that instructions are in short, small steps:** As the disease progresses, people with dementia experience increasing difficulty performing many once-familiar activities. Break activities down into simple steps (pick up the toothbrush... take the cap off the toothpaste... squeeze the toothpaste onto the toothbrush, etc.).
- 2. If they are struggling with their words, be supportive and patient:** Provide the words they are looking for or try "filling in the blanks" but don't cut them off as they may just need more time. Also:
 - Listen actively and carefully to what the person is saying
 - Try to focus on a word or phrase that make sense
 - Respond to the emotional tone of their statement
 - Try to stay calm and show patience
 - Ask a family member about possible meanings of words, names, or phrases you don't understand

3. **Listen for the emotional message in their tone of voice, body language, and their facial expression:** Rely on what you know about the person with dementia to help you figure out what they mean. For example, if they say, "I want to go home", they may mean that they feel lost and are looking for reassurance. Look for an emotional need behind the person's confused communication (for example, "It sounds like you really miss your home. What did you like most about your home?").
4. **Validate how they are feeling:** Listen for their emotional message behind the request for assistance or responsive behaviour. Explore their reality. Acknowledge their emotional state and offer support. For example, "You seem like you are missing your mum. What do you remember most about her?" or "You are looking frightened. Is there anything I can do to help?"
5. **Try non-verbal forms of communication:** A gentle touch can help reassure the person with dementia that they are not being blamed for the communication breakdown. Also, non-verbal signals such as using gestures may be more easily understood than language.

Conversational Busters: What not to do



- **Don't order the person around**
- **Don't use a loud, authoritarian tone of voice**
- **Don't argue or rationalize with the client**
- **Don't tell the person what they can and can't do**
- **Don't use 'baby talk' or speak in a condescending tone**
- **Don't ask a lot of direct questions that rely on good memory**
- **Don't talk about the person in front of them**
- **Don't focus just on the task**
- **Don't try to force your perception of reality onto them**