

# Tips for Successful Communication with Clients with Dementia

## Set the Conversational Stage

- Start the interaction in a positive manner – introduce yourself, comment on the weather, the season, an event of the day.

## Conversational Tips

- **ORIENTING CUES** – give clues to help orient the person – ‘My, what a wet January day it is. Just look at the rain falling.’
- **FILL IN THE BLANKS** – fill in the missing word or part of the sentence.
- **USE FAMILIAR NAMES AND NOUNS** – ‘Hi Mom, it’s me, your daughter, June’ – helps orient and remind; avoids distress at not being able to remember.
- **USE CONCRETE WORDS; AVOID CLICHÉS OR ABSTRACT LANGUAGE** – ‘It’s sure raining hard out there’, rather than ‘it’s raining cats and dogs’.
- **KEEP INSTRUCTIONS SHORT** – ‘It’s lunchtime, Mary. Here’s your spot at the table.’
- **ONE IDEA AT A TIME** – ‘How about a cup of tea?’ rather than ‘After your bath and a walk, we’ll have a cup of tea together.’
- **YES OR NO QUESTIONS** – limit choices and reduce frustration – ‘Would you like coffee or tea? Would you like milk in it? Would you like sugar?’
- **USE POSITIVE STATEMENTS** – instead of ‘No, don’t sit over there’, say, ‘How about sitting over here.’

## Draw upon the person’s remaining memories

- **USE OPEN QUESTIONS THAT LINK INTO MEMORIES** – ‘What was it like living in the country?’ OR choice questions, ‘Did you have chickens or cows on the farm?’
- **MATCHING ASSOCIATIONS** – match opinions or personal experiences – ‘I know you used to enjoy gardening. I like gardening too. I spent the morning pruning my roses. Did you grow roses?’

## Attend to Nonverbal Cues

- **LISTEN TO THE UNDERLYING MEANING AND EMOTIONS** – ‘You sound frustrated this morning. Are you feeling upset about something?’
- **LEARN TO ‘READ’ FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, TONE OF VOICE, BODY LANGUAGE** – body language and tone of voice give us clearer messages than words.

**Remember** – conversation is a learned social experience. Similar to a game of volleyball, a conversation must be bounced back and forth between the players. Even if the words themselves do not make sense, the pattern or structure of conversation itself is important and has meaning.

### **When you are having trouble being understood**

- Be sure you are allowing enough time
- Use visual cues – use pictures, signs, and objects to provide information.
- Try demonstrating what you are saying
- Think about the complexity of what you are saying
- Try a hug and a change of subject

### **When you are having trouble understanding**

- Listen actively and carefully to what the person is trying to say
- Try to focus on a word or phrase that makes sense
- Respond to the emotional tone of the statement
- Try to stay calm and be patient
- Ask family members about possible meanings for words, names or phrases you do not understand

### **Things not to do**

- Don't argue with the person
- Don't order the person around
- Don't tell the person what he or she can't do
- Don't be condescending
- Don't ask a lot of direct questions that rely on a good memory
- Don't talk about people in front of them

### **When verbal communication fails**

- Try distracting the person
- Ignore a verbal outburst if you can't think of any positive response
- Try other forms of communicating

SOURCE: UNDERSTANDING DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS; 1996; ANNE ROBINSON, ET AL, EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY