

COMMUNICATING WITH A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA

Communication requires two people. When one person has failing abilities, communication becomes difficult.

People with dementia often experience a gradual decrease in their ability to communicate as their dementia progresses. They may find it more and more difficult to express themselves clearly to others and to understand what others are saying to them.

This can become frustrating for people with dementia, and for those trying to communicate with them.

The different types of dementia affect the brain in different ways and each individual communicates their thoughts and feelings in a unique fashion. However, there are often similarities in their losses.

How communication is affected:

- In the early stages of some forms of dementia people have difficulty finding the right word; and in the later stage words maybe lost completely in all forms of dementia.
- It becomes harder to put sentences together as the disease progresses.
- Automatic responses such as "hello" are maintained for the longest period of time.
- In the late stages of the disease a person with dementia may have very limited ability to speak.

Remember there is more to communication than what you say.

Communication is made up of:

- body language (including facial expressions, posture and gestures)
- tone and pitch of the voice
- the words that are used

Carers need to be creative and use all forms of communication possible. When speaking try to make sure the message is relayed in a way people with dementia will understand. When listening, read the body language and emotions of people with dementia, as it may not match their words.

The Four S's of Communication

Slow
Simple
Specific
Show

What you can do to help:

- Make sure that you have the person's attention. Eye contact is important. It's a good idea to get down to their level if they are sitting.
- Use touch to help draw and keep the person's attention, as well as to communicate feelings of affection.
- Be calm and gentle.
- Where possible approach the person from the front.
- Try to avoid talking to people with dementia when there is competing noise e.g from the TV or radio.
- Keep your sentences short and simple. Make one point at a time. Try to keep with familiar ideas rather than complex new concepts.
- Allow time for the person to process the statement, and give them time to respond.
- Use people's names rather than pronouns (ie he or she).
- Frame questions very simply asking only one thing at a time. Try to avoid questions which require complicated answers. It is best to ask questions which can be answered with one or two words.
- If it is necessary to repeat a question, try to do so without changing the words you used the first time.
- Acknowledge if the person is having difficulty trying to communicate.
- Check that hearing or eyesight is not impaired. Glasses or a hearing aid may help the person communicate better.

Remember that people retain their feelings and emotions even if they can't understand what is being said. Maintain the person's dignity and self esteem at all times.

What to try and avoid:

- Avoid arguing with or contradicting people with dementia.
- Avoid being condescending – the tone will be picked up even if the words are not understood.
- Don't talk about people in front of them as though they are not there. Even if people are unable to understand what is being said, they are likely to pick up on body language and gestures.
- Don't ask questions that rely on a good memory.

Quality of life is dependent on interactions and relationships with others. Therefore, it is important to keep working on improving communication with people with dementia, even if it is a complex and challenging process.



Tips from a carer

Don't speak too fast. – *Eileen Smith*

I find that if my partner Ray can't get the words out and wants me to help him, it is sometimes a good idea to get him to think of something similar, rather than get stuck on the one word. Then I can have a good guess at what he wants to say. – *Eileen Smith*

Tips from people with dementia

Speak directly to the person and carefully assess their ability to converse. – *Kate Clark*

People with dementia are aware that with time communication will become more difficult and therefore are often more sensitive if others talk past them or ignore them while holding a conversation. – *Kate Clark*

If there is a large family gathering try and include us in the conversation, otherwise we may just sit quietly in the corner. – *Ray Smith*

When possible in the early years, make sure the person with dementia is getting as much social interaction and conversation as needed. – *Kate Clark*

Don't say "throwaway lines" when you are leaving the room, i.e. come and help me in the garden. If your back is to us, we will not be concentrating on your voice; the sound will be blurred, so we will not be able to process the information. – *Ray Smith*

Don't try and rush us, allow us time to try and get the words out. – *Ray Smith*

Do not interrupt when we are speaking. Please wait until we have finished speaking before asking for clarification or making a comment. This is not because we wish to hold the floor, but recognition that we may lose the thread of what we are saying. This also recognises that people with dementia need to have time to think before they respond. – *Ray Smith*

Alzheimers New Zealand has a range of information sheets and booklets available for people with dementia, their carers, families and whānau. Alzheimers member organisations located throughout New Zealand provide a variety of services and support to all people affected by dementia. Contact your local organisation on freephone 0800 004 001.

This information sheet provides a general summary only of the subject matter covered and is not a substitute for informed professional advice. Any person with dementia or their carer or family/whānau should seek professional advice about any individual case. Alzheimers New Zealand is not be liable for any error or omission in this publication, as a result of negligence or otherwise. This information sheet was produced in March 2010.

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