

## Communication and Dementia

Sharing information and ideas can be difficult. For a person with dementia and their friends or family, it is worse. As dementia progresses, the ability to understand declines over time. So does the ability to speak so that others may understand. Dementia may include memory loss, personality, sensory, and behavior changes. Paranoid delusions and hallucinations may also develop. All of which create communication problems.

### **Helpful:**

- Speak slowly, clearly, calmly, and only as loud as needed
- Be positive and upbeat, but genuine
- Give extra time to process and respond before repeating – count to 10
- Be aware of your body language and facial expression
- A soothing tone of voice can be more important than the words
- Keep directions and questions short – one step or question at a time
- Speak face to face, at eye level
- Sit next to if sitting, stand next to if standing
- Call the person by name
- Ask questions that only need a "yes" or "no" response
- Limit choices for easier decision making
- Learn to live in the reality and time frame of the person

### **Not helpful:**

- Insist on remembering – “of course you remember!”
- Scold, judge, or demean – “I told you...”, “Why do you always...”, “Stop asking...”
- Argue with or correct the person

### **Responding to repeated questions and thoughts:**

- Use senses of vision, smell, and touch to answer questions. For example, show an empty medication box rather than saying, “you already took your pills”
- Answer the question in simpler words
- Determine if the questioning is a sign of anxiety or fear - if so, provide reassurance
- Gently redirect attention by changing the topic

- Redirect attention by trying a different activity
- Try a change of place – something in the room may be a trigger

### **Responding to accusations or paranoid statements:**

- Investigate - there may be some truth involved
- Remember that these thoughts are real to the person
- Don't take accusations personally
- Remember that accusations are often an attempt to fill in the blanks for lost memories
- Respond with empathy and understanding. Don't minimize or imply that this is "crazy" thinking
- Take the position of a trusted ally who can help solve the problem
- Redirect by changing topic or activity in a way that seems natural, not a ploy
- Use "therapeutic fibbing" – small lies that can redirect the person without challenging their reality
- Think ahead and have steps to take if verbal attacks or paranoia happens

### **Other problems affecting communication:**

- Age related vision and hearing loss
- Missing or poorly fitting dentures
- Loss of English if learned as a second language
- Loss of verbal speech so thoughts and needs are shared non-verbally or behaviorally

### Sources of Information:

- Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Dementia Capable Wisconsin, Online Training for Caregivers; <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/dementia/family-caregiver-training.htm>
- National Institutes of Health/National Institute on Aging – Alzheimer's Caregiving: Changes in Communication Skills; <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers-caregiving-changes-communication-skills>