



## Steps to Enhancing Communication: Interacting With Persons With Alzheimer's Disease

### Changes in Communication

The way in which Alzheimer's disease affects communication will vary with each person. The person with dementia may find it increasingly difficult to express him/herself in words, and have trouble understanding what has been said. Those who interact with the person may recognize some of the following changes:

- Difficulty finding the right words
- Using familiar words repeatedly
- Inventing new words to describe familiar objects
- Easily losing train of thought
- Difficulty organizing words logically
- Reverting to speaking in a native language
- Using curse words
- Speaking less often
- Relying on nonverbal gestures more often

\*Keep in mind that a variety of physical conditions and medications can also affect a person's communication. Be sure to check with a physician when you notice significant changes.

### Helping the Person with Alzheimer's Communicate: Your Approach to Listening

Communication with a person affected by Alzheimer's disease requires patience and understanding. First and foremost, you must be a good listener. When helping the person communicate:

#### **Be patient and supportive**

Let them know you're listening and trying to understand what they're saying.

#### **Show your interest**

Maintain eye contact and show them that you care about what they are saying.

#### **Offer comfort and reassurance**

If the person is having difficulty expressing him/herself, let them know it's all right. Encourage them to continue to explain their thoughts.

#### **Give them time**

Let them think about and describe what they want. Be careful not to interrupt.

#### **Avoid criticizing or correcting**

Don't tell the person what they are saying is incorrect. Rather, listen and try to find meaning in what is being said. Repeat what was said if clarification is needed.

#### **Don't argue**

If the person is saying something you don't agree with, let it be.

#### **Offer a guess**

If the person uses the wrong word or cannot find a word, try helping them out. If you understand what they mean, it may not be necessary to provide the correct word. In either case, be careful not to cause unnecessary frustration.

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## **Focus on feelings, not facts**

Sometimes, the emotions being expressed are more important than what is being said. Look for the feelings behind the words. At times, tone of voice and other actions may help you understand how the person is really feeling.

## **Limit your distractions**

Find a place that is quiet, so that you won't be interrupted and they can focus on their thoughts

## **Encourage them to communicate nonverbally**

If you don't understand what he/she is trying to say, ask them to point or gesture.

## **Maintain a Daily Routine**

Depending on the advancement of the disease, the person may have difficulty coping with change. A structured routine will help the person maintain their abilities. It may also save you time and energy.

## **Involve the Person with Daily Tasks**

Participating in household tasks helps maintain the person's self-esteem. Helping a person too much may result in the loss of an ability. For example, if you begin dressing the person, they might soon forget how to perform this function.

## **Explain more after the Person wakes**

When the person wakes up from a nap or a night's sleep, he/she may be more disoriented than usual. Expect this and be prepared to orient them through general conversation.

## *Helping the Person with Alzheimer's Understand: Your Approach to Communicating*

As Alzheimer's Disease progresses, communication can become increasingly challenging. Sensitive, ongoing communication is important, no matter how difficult it may become or how confused the person may appear. Although he/she may not always respond, they still require and benefit from continued communication. When communicating with a persons with Alzheimer's, words must be chosen carefully. To enhance your interactions, try some of the following techniques:

### **Identify yourself**

Approach them from the front and tell the person who you are.

### **Address the person by name**

This is not only courteous, but also helps orient the person and get their attention.

### **Use short, simple, familiar words and sentences**

Don't overwhelm the individual with length requests or stories. Speak concisely and keep to the point. In some cases, slang words may be helpful.

### **Talk slowly and clearly**

Be aware of speed and clarity when speaking

### **Give one-step directions**

Break tasks and instructions into clear, simple steps, giving one step at a time

### **Ask one question at a time**

Don't overwhelm or confuse the person with too many questions at once.

### **Patiently wait for a response**

He/she may need some extra time to process your request. Give them the time and encouragement they need to respond.

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## **Repeat information or questions**

If the person does not respond, wait a moment and ask again. Use the same phrasing and words as before.

## **Turn questions into answers**

Try providing the solution, rather than the question. For example, say "The bathroom is right here" instead of asking, "Do you need to use the bathroom?"

## **Avoid literal expressions**

Directions such as, "Hop in!" may be taken literally and cause unnecessary confusion.

## **Avoid pronouns**

Instead of saying, "Here it is," try "Here is your hat."

## **Emphasize key words**

Stress words that are most important such as "Here is your coffee."

## **Make negatives more positive**

Instead of saying, "Don't go there," try saying, "Let's go here."

## **Give visual cues**

Demonstrate your request by pointing, touching or beginning to task for the person.

## **Avoid quizzing**

Some reminiscence can be health, but avoid asking "Do you remember when....?" Or using statements like, "You should know who that is."

## **Provide simple explanations**

Avoid using logic and reason at great length. Provide thorough responses in a clear and concise way.

## **Write things down**

Try using written explanations for reminders or when verbal ones seem too confusing.

## **Remember the importance of love and affection**

Sometimes holding hands, touching, hugging, and praise will get the person to respond when all else fails.

## **Try again later**

If the person looks like they're not paying attention, try to communicate again a few moments later.

## **Treat the person with dignity and respect**

Avoid talking down to them or talking as if they are no there.

## **Also, be aware of the tone you use:**

- Speak slowly and distinctly
- Use a gentle and relaxing tone of voice. A lower voice pitch is more calming.
- Convey an easy-going, non-demanding manner of speaking
- Be aware of your feelings and attitude. They are often communicated, unintentionally, through tone of voice.

## **Pay special attention to your body language:**

- Always approach the person from the front and avoid sudden movements
- Maintain eye contact
- Be aware of your stance to avoid sending a negative message
- Use positive and friendly facial expressions
- Use nonverbal such as pointing, gesturing and touching