

Quick Tips: Dementia

Understanding and Communicating

Communication is a vital tool that we use every day in our work and personal lives. Whether we realize it or not, every word, action, and body posture communicates something to others. Understanding more clearly how we communicate can make you much better able to understand others, and to make yourself understood. Working with someone with dementia or memory loss can make clear communication even harder. Following are some tips for you to use to enhance your everyday communication.

Be aware of your Body Language. When we lose verbal communication, often our awareness of nonverbal cues is even greater. People with dementia can sense how you are feeling through your posture, facial expressions, and other body language, maybe even better than through your words. Relax, smile, and shake out your own tensions.

Create a mood. Chat about pleasant things before you ask the person you're caring for to do something difficult. Laugh, joke, tell a funny story, or simply share something you saw that made you smile. You'll create a mood that will make your job much easier.

Use touch. Touch the shoulder, arm or hand lightly and casually while you're talking. This sets a tone of reassuring, non-threatening communication.

Remove distractions. Turn off the TV, radio or move to a quiet location. This will help the person you're caring for focus on you, and give you a much better chance of communicating clearly.

Make eye contact. Look the person you're caring for directly in the eye. Remember to smile so the eye contact is pleasant, not threatening. Never approach from behind and startle or frighten someone. Eye contact should be on the same level – sit or squat down if you need to be eye-to-eye.

Speak slowly and clearly. Use short sentences, and clear, one-step directions. Talk slowly, but don't yell.

Speak in a deep tone of voice. A lower voice tone is much easier to hear than a higher tone. We tend to raise the volume and the tone when speaking to someone hard of hearing, when often we can speak slowly, softly and in a low voice tone and be heard clearly

Allow time for your words to be understood. Speak slowly, then pause and let the person take their time understanding your words

Repeat directions exactly. If you give the same directions more than once, say them in the same way each time. You'll only increase confusion if you tell someone to do something different (in their interpretation) each time.

Use touch and reassure. If someone is not understanding you, and it appears to be distressing to them, hug them, pat their hand, and say, “It’s OK, we’ll muddle through together.” Even if they don’t have a clue what “muddle through” means, you’re conveying to them that you’re there for them, and they don’t have to keep trying to understand.

Listen for feeling behind words. You are also a receiver of communication, not just a sender. If you can’t understand the words the person with memory loss is trying to say to you, try to interpret the feelings being communicated. Stay calm, get someone to help you understand if it seems important to the person.

Communicate in other ways. Remember, words aren’t the only way we communicate. Familiar songs can be very reassuring, touching, massage, or walking together are also ways to communicate support and caring to people. When verbal communication no longer works, remember you still have many ways to communicate together