

## Learning Communication Skills

In the early stages of dementia, a person's communication difficulties may be mild and easier to manage. Communication will become increasingly more difficult as the dementia progresses and many people may eventually lose the ability to speak or respond to conversation. This means that you as the carer are likely to need to change over time how you communicate with the person you are caring for to suit their particular stage of dementia

People living with dementia can often understand far more than they are able to express and so will sense your own emotional state as well as becoming frustrated that they can't express their feelings - This can be a complex situation so you must be prepared to try different strategies to help you communicate with them effectively and therefore help both of you cope

## Basic Communication Skills

- Try to stop what you are doing and focus just on the person – make sure you are fully present in the moment
- Limit distractions like the TV, radio or busy locations – if possible, find a calm and quiet environment as noise can cause anxiety
- Speak slowly, clearly and in short sentences, say the person's name when talking to them and be specific by using people's names or the names of objects rather than she/he/it
- Touch the person's arm to make a physical connection and attract their attention, if they feel comfortable with this, being tactile is important
- Turn your body towards them and make eye contact whilst using positive body language – smile and convey warmth with compassion
- Listen carefully – do not try to argue, reason with or correct the person
- Give them plenty of time to answer questions or respond, the brain with dementia will compute more slowly
- Use gestures or pictures to act out what you're saying, perhaps miming having a drink or putting on your shoes – perhaps use a photo of where you are going
- Avoid open-ended questions or offering too many choices – two choices is sufficient
- While it is natural to become frustrated or angry when communication is difficult, the person living with dementia will sense your emotion - so it may help sometimes to remove yourself from the situation briefly to calm down and then return

## Common communication challenges faced

- Difficulty pronouncing or finding the right words
- Problems following a conversation
- Difficulty understanding humour or sarcasm
- Difficulty recognising other people's emotions or behaviours
- Repeating themselves
- A loss of inhibitions, using inappropriate or offensive language
- Stress caused by trying to make sense of the current environment
- Difficulties with reading, writing and understanding activities such as answering the phone, reading emails, messages and letters

## The person is struggling to find the right words

- Give them time to try to find the right word for themselves
- If they are still struggling, calmly suggest the word they might be looking for
- Ask gentle questions to draw out what they are trying to communicate and encourage them to use non-verbal communication – pointing to what they are talking about or showing them pictures
- Try naming specific objects to help the person to identify the words

## The person is upset or angry and cannot explain why

- This might happen because they could be in pain or feeling unwell, or something could be irritating them about their environment, such as noise. They may be frightened and confused, frustrated or feeling abandoned or alone  
They may also feel you are not listening to them or acknowledging their feelings
- Consider whether they may be in physical discomfort – for example from arthritis, toothache, a headache, a urine or other infection – Sometimes they can't identify where they have pain or be able to explain it to you
- Check for any bruises, redness or swelling that could be causing pain
- Validate their feelings (this is important), for example by saying "I can see you are angry or frustrated about something – can I help?"
- Listen to what they say and do not challenge or dismiss their thoughts and feelings

## The person is asking to go home when they already there

- This is common in the early evening and is known as 'sundowning'. The person might be craving a sense of belonging, safety, security or familiarity. They might be remembering past routines and be unaware that these things have changed
- They may be confused about time and place and think that their parents are waiting for them to come home, or that they still live in the place where they spent their childhood or early life
- They might be disorientated by visitors in their home, making it seem unfamiliar
- A daytime routine is important – as is a bedtime routine (basically routine is very important!)
- Close the curtains and turn on lights to ease the transition from day to night
- Listen to their thoughts and feelings avoid correcting or reasoning with them
- Ask them about their former home and what it was like
- Look at old photos to provide a sense of familiarity
- Try to distract them by asking them to help you with something, making tea, watching something on TV or moving into another room

## “What are you doing in my house? Who are you?”

- This might be due to loss of recognition of familiar people, faces and the environment.
- It could be due to fear or memory changes - If this occurs suddenly it could indicate an infection or other health condition that causes confusion
- **Try to put yourself into the person’s reality – This is really important as whatever they are feeling or experiencing is real to them**
- Remind them verbally of who you are: “it’s me, Mary, your daughter”
- Maybe go into another room for a few minutes and re-enter calmly saying: Hello Dad, I’m back now, lovely to see you” – Sometimes they will not remember what just happened
- Don’t challenge or dismiss their thoughts – trying to correct them will only cause further stress

## They keep asking for their mum or dad

- Many people associate their parents with a sense of belonging, comfort, security or love. They might be trying to experience these feelings again, even if their parents are no longer alive
- Ask them what their parents were/are like and what they liked doing together
- Listen to their answers carefully and provide some affirmation like perhaps “your mom sounds like a lovely person”
- Realizing that their relative has died may cause further distress and you may find it best to just gently change the topic of conversation

## The person becomes withdrawn or unresponsive

- There may be damage in the areas of the brain responsible for speech and understanding
- They may be experiencing low mood or depression, causing them to avoid social contact and withdraw into themselves (Really important to maintain social interaction)
- They may be finding a public place or visitors overwhelming
- They may be physically unwell or experiencing delirium
- It is usual for a person living with dementia to sleep more and also natural for a person to become increasingly drowsy and withdrawn towards the later stages of dementia
- Bear in mind that this is a normal symptom as dementia progresses and while you can support the person to engage with other people, they may never go back to interacting and communicating as they used to
  
- Face the person and gain eye contact
- Gently place a hand on their arm to attract attention
- Pace your conversation by speaking slowly, allowing them time to process the information
- Avoid giving too much information at once or asking too many questions
- The person with dementia can confuse “yes” and “no” – “No” is a powerful word that can instil anxiety – Try answering questions with a “yes” – for example: “Yes we can do that, however we need to do this first” or “Yes, that should be ok”, - and then change the subject

Just like most advice – this is always easier to administer than to implement and not everything works for everyone – as dementia affects everyone differently and we are all unique

All of the emotions that you feel though are emotions that we all experience as carers...so please try to be kind to yourself – The person living with dementia will experience reality differently and most times it will really help you to try to just put yourself into “their reality”