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Difficulties with language and communication are common symptoms of dementia. As the condition progresses, it will gradually affect the way a person speaks, understands and interacts with other people.

Often, making small adaptations to how we communicate can make a big difference, helping to prevent confusion, misunderstandings and frustration. It can help build and maintain positive relationships that are based on care, compassion and support.

Understanding communication challenges in a person with dementia

Some of the communication challenges faced by a person with dementia may include:

- difficulty pronouncing or finding the right words
- problems following conversation, especially in a noisy environment
- difficulty understanding humour or sarcasm
- difficulty recognising other people's emotions or behaviours
- repeating themselves due to reduced concentration and attention or memory problems
- a loss of inhibitions around using inappropriate or offensive language
- stress caused by trying to make sense of the environment, situations and other people
- difficulties with reading and writing which can affect day-to-day activities eg reading emails, text messages and letters; filling in forms; helping children with homework; or completing tasks at work

Common communication issues and how to help

It is helpful to be aware of the communication challenges people with dementia may face so you can put strategies in place that might stop their distress from escalating. Here are some of the ways in which a person with dementia may communicate and how you could respond.

The person is having difficulty following conversations

Why this might happen: changes in how people recognise and process sounds can cause confusion and make it hard to follow conversations. This may be particularly difficult in noisy environments or if lots of people are around them.

How you can help:

- Try to ensure only one person speaks at a time
- Face the person and speak slowly and clearly – people often use body language and lip reading to help them make sense of conversations
- Reduce background noise like the TV or radio
- Avoid noisy places such as restaurants, parties, large social events and shopping centres as these can be overwhelming – do not avoid public places or social contact, but try to keep to quieter places or times
- If the person wears hearing aids or glasses, encourage them to use them as this will assist with both hearing and reading lips/ body language

The person is struggling to find the right words

Why this might happen: dementia often affects people's ability to use language, causing difficulty with word-finding and muddling words.

How you can help:

- Give the person time to find the right word themselves
- If they are still struggling, calmly suggest the word they might be looking for, or ask questions to draw out what they are trying to communicate, eg, "Is there something you need from the kitchen?"
- Encourage them to use non-verbal communication, eg 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

Why this might happen: the person could be in pain or feeling unwell, or something could be irritating them about their environment, such as noise, bright light or a strong cooking smell. They may be frightened and confused, or feeling alone or abandoned. They may feel you are not listening to them or acknowledging their feelings.

How you can help:

- Recognise the person's non-verbal behaviours
- Consider whether they may be in physical discomfort, for example from arthritis, toothache, a headache, or a urine or chest infection
- Check for any cuts, bruises, redness or swelling that could be causing pain
- Validate their feelings, for example by saying, "I can see you are angry about something – can I help?" or, "What is worrying you or upsetting you?"
- Listen to what they say and do not challenge or dismiss their thoughts and feelings

The person looks confused and does not seem to understand you

Why this might happen: this could be due to a reduced level of understanding, difficulty concentrating or too many distractions. They may have an underlying infection such as a urinary tract infection (UTI) or other physical health issue, which could cause a state of intense confusion called delirium (please see Sources of support on p15).

How you can help:

- Be reassuring, compassionate and gentle
- Remind them who you are and what their relationship is to you, for example, “It’s me, Mum, your son Amir”
- Try saying or asking something in a different way, for example using shorter sentences and avoiding open-ended questions
- Give the person time to process and respond to your question
- Put yourself on their level – if they are sitting, sit down too – and make eye contact when you speak
- If appropriate, use touch, for example to guide them gently to where they need to go

The person is asking to go home when they are already at home

Why this might happen: 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 they 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. Please see Sources of support on p15 for more information on sundowning.

The person might be disorientated by visitors in their home, making it seem unfamiliar.

How you can help:

- Close the curtains and turn on lights before dusk to ease the transition from day to night
- Listen to the person’s thoughts and respect their feelings; avoid correcting or reasoning with them
- Ask them about their former home and what it was like
- Look at old photos or videos to provide a sense of familiarity and peace of mind – creating a ‘life story’ (a record of the person’s past and present life, values, likes/dislikes etc) can help with this; please see Sources of support on p15
- Try to distract the person by asking them to help you with a household task, making a cup of tea, watching something on TV or moving into another room

The person living with dementia says, “What are you doing in my house? Who are you?”

Why this might happen: 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.

How you can help:

- Try to put yourself into the person’s reality
- Remind them verbally of who you are: “It’s me, Julie, your daughter, and I’ve brought your grandson Danny to see you”
- Think about other ways to remind the person who you are, eg wearing a perfume or an item of clothing that they associate with you
- Go into another room for a few minutes and then re-enter calmly, saying something like, “Hello Dad, I’m back now, lovely to see you”
- Do not challenge or dismiss their thoughts – trying to correct them can cause distress
- If you think the person may be unwell or in pain, speak to their GP

The person with dementia keeps asking for their mum or dad

Why this might happen: many people associate their parents with a sense of belonging, comfort, security or love. The person might be trying to experience these feelings again, even if their parents are no longer alive.

How you can help:

- Ask the person what their parents are/were like, and what they like/liked doing together
- Listen carefully to their answers and provide affirmation, for example by saying, “Your mum sounds like a very special person”
- If their relative has died, you might need to remind them; however, this may cause distress so if they are finding it hard to understand or retain this information, you may decide it is best to gently change the topic of conversation





The person keeps talking about needing to go to work, even if they are no longer working

Why this might happen: the person may need to feel purposeful – that they are useful and needed. They may have found a sense of identity in their working life that they no longer feel, or want to reminisce by telling you about their past occupation. If they no longer work, they may have forgotten this and be anxious that they are late or absent.

How you can help:

- Talk to the person about their experiences in their working life; listen to and validate the information they share
- Encourage them to take part in activities that might help them feel useful and purposeful – for example if they used to work in an office, they could help you sort out paperwork, or if they had a practical profession, they could help with simple DIY. Do not worry if they cannot carry out these tasks to their usual standards

The person becomes withdrawn or unresponsive

Why this might happen: 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. Or they may be finding a public place or visitors overwhelming. They may be physically unwell or experiencing delirium. It is also natural for a person to become increasingly drowsy and withdrawn towards the end of life.

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.

How you can help:

- Face the person and gain eye contact
- Place a hand on their arm to attract their attention
- Pace your conversation by speaking slowly and allowing them time to process information and respond
- Avoid giving too much information or too many instructions at once, or asking too many questions
- Try asking the person if something is wrong and listening to their answer
- If they express that they are feeling overwhelmed or need some time alone, find a way to give them the peace and quiet they need
- Consider booking an appointment with the GP to investigate whether depression or delirium could be a problem

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Good communication skills to learn

In the early stages of dementia, a person's communication difficulties may be mild and easier to manage. As their condition progresses, communicating can become increasingly hard, and many people will eventually lose the ability to speak or respond to conversation. This means you are likely to need to change how you communicate with the person over time to suit their stage of dementia.

People living with dementia can often understand far more than they can express, so always involve them in communication. These tips may help – but communication is complex so be prepared to try different strategies to work out how you can best support the person.

- Stop what you are doing and focus 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
- Speak slowly, clearly and in short sentences
- Say the person's name when talking to them
- Be specific – use 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
- Turn your body towards the person and make eye contact when you are speaking
- Use positive body language – smile and convey warmth and compassion

- Listen carefully, with empathy – do not try to argue, reason with or correct the person
- Give the person plenty of time to answer questions or respond in conversation so they can organise their thoughts and find the right words
- Use gestures to act out what you're saying, eg miming having a drink or putting on your shoes
- Use pictures to illustrate what you're saying, eg a photo of where you are going or who you are going to see
- Avoid open-ended questions or offering too many choices: rather than saying, "Where shall we go today?" try saying, "Shall we go to the café or garden centre today?"
- Be aware of your behaviour and body language. While it is natural to become frustrated or angry when communication is difficult, the person with dementia may sense this, so it may help to remove yourself from the situation briefly to calm down
- Treat the person as an equal – be careful not to patronise them or speak for them if, with time and support, they are capable of speaking for themselves

If there is a sudden change in the person's ability to communicate and they seem more irritable, confused or distressed, visit the GP to find out if there is an underlying and potentially treatable cause, like pain or an infection.