alzheimer's association®

# communication

## Best ways to interact with the person with dementia

the compassion to care, the leadership to conquer

**Alzheimer's disease and related dementias can gradually diminish a person's ability to communicate.**

**Not only do people with dementia have more difficulty expressing thoughts and emotions, they also have more trouble understanding others.**

**The ability to exchange our ideas, wishes and feelings is a basic need.**

**Communication is:**

- Sending and receiving messages
- How we relate to each other
- An important part of our relationships
- A way to express who we are
- More than talking and listening
- About attitude, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language

## *Changes in communication*

**Changes in the ability to communicate are unique to each person. A caregiver may recognize differences in the person with dementia such as:**

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

**A number of physical conditions and medications can also affect a person's ability to communicate. Consult your doctor when you notice major changes.**

**The Alzheimer's Association recommends ways to communicate with the person with dementia so you might understand each other better. Inside, you'll find tips for:**


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## 1 Helping the person communicate

Communicating with a person with dementia requires patience and understanding. Above all, you must be a good listener.

### To help the person communicate:

#### *Be patient and supportive*

Let the person know you're listening and trying to understand what is being said.

#### *Show your interest*

Keep good eye contact. Show the person that you care about what is being said.

#### *Offer comfort and reassurance*

If he or she is having trouble communicating, let the person know that it's OK. Encourage the person to continue to explain his or her thoughts.

#### *Give the person time*

Let the person think about and describe whatever he or she wants to. Be careful not to interrupt.

#### *Avoid criticizing or correcting*

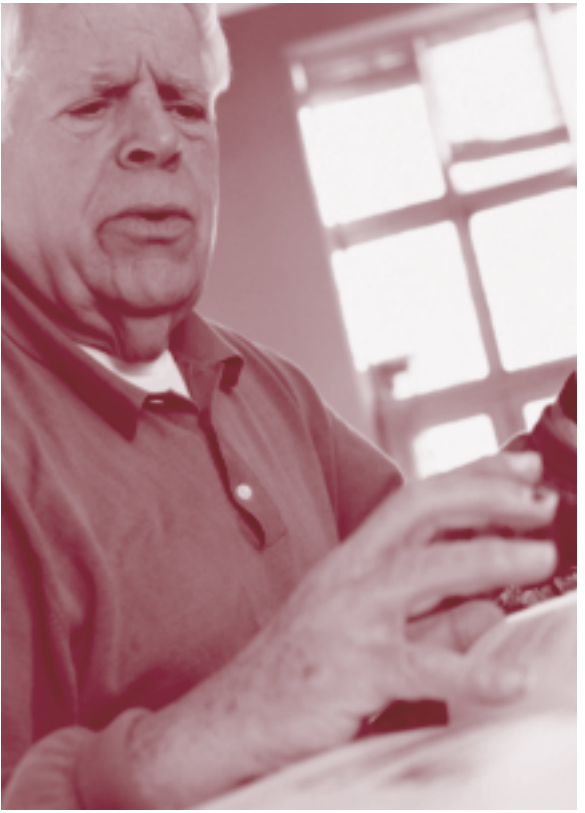
Don't tell the person what he or she is saying is incorrect. Instead, listen and try to find the meaning in what is being said. Repeat what was said, if it helps to clarify the thought.

#### *Avoid arguing*

If the person says something you don't agree with, let it be. Arguing usually only makes things worse.

#### *Offer a guess*

If the person uses the wrong word or cannot find a word, try guessing the right one. If you understand what the person means, you may not need to give the correct word. Be careful not to cause unnecessary frustration.



### *Encourage unspoken communication*

If you don't understand what is being said, ask the person to point or gesture.

### *Limit distractions*

Find a place that's quiet, so you won't be interrupted. The surroundings should support the person's ability to focus on his or her thoughts.

### *Focus on the feelings, not the 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 provide clues.

## 2 Best ways for you to communicate

As dementia progresses, communication can become more and more challenging. Sensitive, ongoing communication is important, no matter how difficult it may become or how confused the person may appear.

While the person may not always respond, he or she still requires and benefits from continued communication.

When communicating with a person with dementia, it's especially important to choose your words carefully.

## To best communicate:

### *Identify yourself*

Approach the person from the front. Tell the person who you are.

### *Call the person by name*

This is not only courteous, it helps orient the person and gets his or her attention.

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

Don't overwhelm the person with lengthy requests or stories. Speak in a concise manner. 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 down tasks and instructions into clear, simple steps. Give 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*

The person may need extra time to process your request. Give the person the time and encouragement he or she needs to respond.

### *Repeat information or questions*

If the person doesn't respond, wait a moment. Then ask again. Ask the question in the same way, using the same 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 confusing expressions*

If you ask the person to "Hop in!" – he or she may take that as literal instructions. Describe the action directly to prevent confusion. "Please come here. Your shower is ready."

### *Avoid vague words*

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

### *Emphasize key words*

Stress the words in a sentence you most want to draw attention to, like "Here is your *coffee*."

### *Turn negatives into positives*

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

### *Give visual cues*

To help demonstrate the task, point or touch the item you want the person to use. Or, begin the task for the person.

### *Avoid quizzing*

Sometimes reminiscing may be healthy. But avoid asking, "Do you remember when ... ?" Stay away from saying things like, "You should know who that is."

### *Give simple explanations*

Avoid using logic and reason at great length. Give a complete response in a clear and concise way.

### *Write things down*

Trying using simple written notes for reminders, if the person is able to understand them. A written response may also help when a spoken one seems too confusing.

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

Avoid talking down to the person or talking as if he or she isn't there.

### *Be aware of your tone of voice*

- Speak slowly and distinctly
- Use a gentle and relaxed tone of voice – a lower pitch is more calming
- Convey an easygoing, non-demanding manner of speaking
- Be aware of your feelings and attitude – they are often communicated through your tone of voice, even when you don't mean to

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

- Always approach the person from the front
- Avoid sudden movements
- Keep good eye contact; if the person is seated or reclining, get down to that level
- Be aware of your stance to avoid sending a bad message
- Use positive, friendly facial expressions
- Use unspoken communication like pointing, gesturing or touch

## 3 People with hearing limitations

**If the person has difficulty hearing:**

- Approach the person from the front
- Stand directly in front of the person when speaking to him or her
- Get the person's attention by saying his or her name, and give a gentle touch
- Speak slowly and clearly
- Use a lower tone of voice
- Use unspoken communication like pointing, gesturing or touch
- Write things down, if needed
- If he or she has a hearing aid, encourage the person to wear it; check the battery often

## 4 People with vision limitations

### If the person has difficulty seeing:

- Avoid startling the person
- Don't make loud noises or sudden movements
- Identify yourself as you approach the person
- Tell the person of your intentions before you begin
- Use large-print or audiotape materials, if available
- If he or she has glasses, encourage the person to wear them; keep them clean and have the prescription checked regularly

*10 quick tips*

# *Better communication*

1. Be calm and supportive
2. Focus on the feelings, not the facts
3. Pay attention to tone of voice
4. Address the person by his or her name
5. Speak slowly, and use short, simple words
6. Ask one question at a time
7. Avoid vague words and negative statements
8. Don't talk about the person as if he or she weren't there
9. Use unspoken communication, like pointing
10. Be patient, flexible and understanding

The Alzheimer's Association, the world leader in Alzheimer research, care and support, is dedicated to finding prevention methods, treatments and an eventual cure for Alzheimer's.

For reliable information and support, contact the Alzheimer's Association:

**1.800.272.3900**

**www.alz.org**

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