

Connecting with the Spirit of People with Dementia

Connecting with the spirit of older adults with cognitive impairment begins with some basic principles for communication.

Principles for Working with People who have Alzheimer's Disease

1. **Gain Attention** — Initial talks with cognitively impaired persons should begin by gaining their attention. Find a quiet place, free from distractions. Make eye contact.
2. **Speak *with* the person not *at* the person** — Speak in a manner that you would like to be spoken to—as an adult and with respect, not as children. Confused persons have feelings. They understand your feelings better than they understand your words.
3. **Simple Directions** — When asking the person to do something, be conscious of the number of steps in the request. Most confused persons can handle no more than two steps at a time. Two step directions—no more.
4. **Maintain Self-Esteem** — Like everyone else, people with dementia need to feel good about themselves. Be aware of how your communication can build up or take down the person's sense of competence.
5. **Identify Strengths, not just weaknesses** — We sometimes think of a person with dementia as being a shadow of their former self, with diminished power and vigor. As you work with them, look for areas of strength as well as areas which need your support.
6. **Significant Others** — People who are significant to the person are an important factor in care and treatment. Include them as you attempt to reach the confused person.

Adapted from: Brown, M.J., Ellor, J.W., "An Approach to Treatment of the Symptoms Caused by Cognitive Disorders in the Aged," *Salud Publica De Mexico*, May-June 1981, Vol. 23, No.3, PP. 259 – 268



Useful Approaches to Connecting with the Spirit of Persons with Dementia

1. **Benevolent Touch**— Most people will appreciate a gentle touch on the shoulder or holding hands during prayer. It is possible that this time of spiritual touch may be the only touch they receive that day. It can be a holy moment for that person. At the same time, we need to recognize that touching can bring about agitation.
2. **Music** — Music is the language of the spirit. It touches the soul and speaks in ways we do not completely comprehend. Music is closely related to memory as well. Playing or singing old hymns or appropriate music that is familiar is almost sure to strike a chord with the person with dementia.
3. **Quotes and Religious Texts** — Familiar scripture passages and bible verses from the person’s religious tradition or spiritual readings and stories, may be comforting and even lead to some thought-provoking conversations.
4. **Symbols and Ritual.** Symbols and rituals speak volumes without using words. Symbols create a visual representation of things that cannot be adequately expressed verbally. Ritual is the deliberate repetition of meaningful events. Something as simple as shaking hands, sharing a cup of tea or making the sign of the cross, if these have been established traditions, will often make a significant connection for people with cognitive impairment and limited verbal skills.
5. **Silence.** Don’t be afraid of silence. Never underestimate the ministry of presence. Maya Angelou once said: People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. This may be especially true for people with dementia. Sometimes words are not necessary to make a spiritual connection.

Adapted from: Spiritual care and dementia by Christopher Durfrene

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