

**Compassionate Communication With the AD Patient**

By Liz Ayres: A volunteer of the Alzheimer's Association and former caregiver

**Don't**

Don't reason.  
Don't argue.  
Don't confront.

Don't remind them they forget.  
Don't question recent memory.  
Don't take it personally!



Ooops! You must be kidding.  
You mean I can't reason???  
or argue??? or remind ...???

**Do**

Give short, one-sentence explanations.  
Repeat instructions or sentences *exactly* the same way.  
Allow plenty of time for comprehension.  
Eliminate "but" from your vocabulary; substitute "nevertheless".

Agree with them or distract them to a different subject or activity.  
Accept the blame when something's wrong (even if it's fantasy).  
Leave the room, if necessary, to avoid confrontations.

Respond to the feelings rather than the words.  
Be patient and cheerful and reassuring. Do go with the flow.  
My appeal to you: Please elevate your level of generosity and graciousness.



Hmmm...accept the blame? !  
This is gonna be tough!

**Remember**

They are not crazy or lazy. They are saying normal things, and doing normal things, *for an AD patient*. If they were doing things, or saying things, to deliberately aggravate you, they would have a different diagnosis.

Some days they'll seem normal, but they're *not*. Their reality is now different than yours and *you cannot change them.* You can't control the disease. You can only control your reaction to it.

Their disability is memory loss. They cannot remember and can't remember that they cannot remember. They'll ask the same question over and over believing it's the first time they've asked.

They do not hide things; they *protect* things by putting them in a safe place and then forgetting they've done so. Do not take 'stealing' accusations personally.

They are scared all the time. Each patient reacts differently to fear. They may become passive, uncooperative, hostile, angry, agitated, verbally abusive, or physically combative. They may even do them all at different times, or alternate between them. Anxiety may compel them to *shadow you* (follow everywhere). They can't remember your reassurances. Keep saying them.

Call the helpline if you need suggestions on handling challenging situations.

"Once dementia is diagnosed, the patient is excused 100% of the time."  
-Adapted from *Alzheimer's: A Handbook for the Caretaker* by Eileen H. Driscoll, R.N., Branden Publishing Company, 1994

## Examples

Alzheimer's Association  
4144 N Central Expressway, Suite 750, Dallas, TX 75204  
Helpline (800) 272-3900 [www.alzdallas.org](http://www.alzdallas.org)

### Don't reason.

Patient: "What doctor's appointment? There's nothing wrong with me."

Don't reason: "You've been seeing the doctor every three months for the past two years. It's written on the calendar and I told you about it yesterday and this morning."

DO offer a short explanation: "It's just a regular check-up."

### Don't ask questions of recent memory

Patient: "Hello, Susie. I see you've brought a friend with you".

Don't question memory: "Hi Mom. You remember Eric, don't you?" or "What did you do today?"

DO offer short explanation: "Hi Mom. You look wonderful. This is Eric. We Work together."

### Don't argue.

Patient: "I didn't write this check. Someone at the bank is forging my signature."

Don't argue: "What? Don't be silly! The bank wouldn't be forging your signature."

DO respond to feelings: "That's a scary thought."  
Or reassure: "I'll make sure they don't do that."  
Or distract: "Would you help me fold the towels?"

### Don't take it personally!

Patient: "Who are you? Where is my husband?"

Don't take it personally: "What do you mean 'who is your husband'? I am!"

DO go with the flow, reassure: "He'll be here for dinner."

Or distract: "How about some milk and cookies?"



Who me? Take it personally?  
Of course not! Well, maaaybe...

### Don't confront.

Patient: "Nobody is going to make decisions for me. You can go now...and don't come back!"

Don't confront: "I'm not going anywhere, and you can't remember enough to make your own decisions."

DO accept blame or respond to feelings: "I'm sorry this is a tough time."  
Or reassure: "I love you and we are going to get through this together."  
Or distract: "You know what? Don has a new job and he's really excited about it."

### Do repeat exactly.

Patient: "I'm going to the store for a newspaper."

Don't repeat differently: "Please put your shoes on", then "You will need to put your shoes on."

DO repeat exactly: "Please put your shoes on", and again, "Please put your shoes on."

### Don't remind them that they forgot.

Patient: "Joe hasn't called for a long time. I hope he's okay."

Don't remind: "Joe called yesterday and you talked to him for 15 minutes."

DO reassure: "You really like talking to Joe, don't you?"  
Or distract: "Let's call him when we get back from our walk."

### Do eliminate 'but', substitute nevertheless.

Patient: "I'm not eating this. I hate chicken."

Don't say 'but': "I know chicken is not your favorite food, but it is what we are having for dinner."

DO say 'nevertheless': "I know chicken is not your favorite food, (smile) nevertheless I'd appreciate it if you would eat a little bit."