

alzheimer's association®

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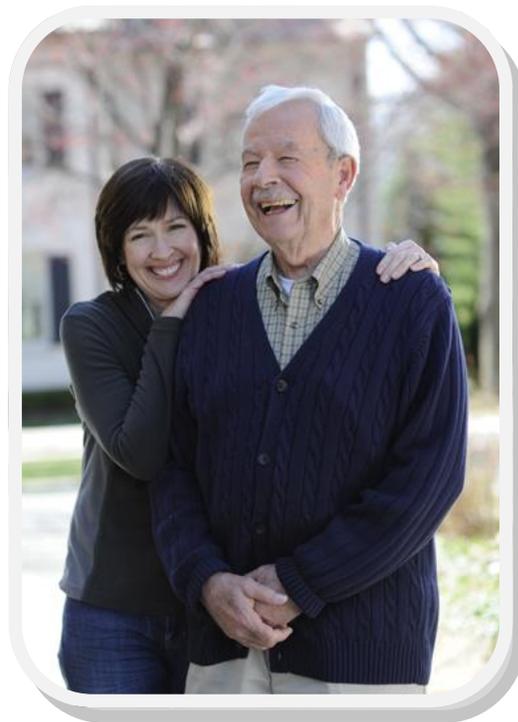
They will never forget how you made them feel: Tips for Better Communication

By Darlene Rabe-Kerr, RN, MSN, CNS

As a nurse we learn from our patients every day. I will never forget the lesson a lovely English woman with Alzheimer's Disease taught me about communication when I was just starting out in nursing. Its also one of my funniest nurses' stories...

I had the good fortune to be assigned to a pleasant, interesting, communicative woman with Alzheimer's disease for three nights in a row. We got to know each other very well, and although she was unable to provide a lot of history on herself or her medical condition, each day we were able to go deeper regarding her medical history or simply discuss a funny thing that happened that day. She was full of humor, and found many things in this new environment not just confusing but absolutely hilarious. Sometimes the stories were direct and to the point, and sometimes they were very meandering, not really making a whole lot of sense. I would listen and ask the occasional question, to which she would often reply in the most pleasant English accent "I can't remember". By the third night, this was a pretty common refrain as she was telling very detailed stories. I asked more than my share of questions and slightly exasperated she sounded just like Mary Poppins when she replied "Its called dementia...." I nearly fell over laughing, and I must say so did she!

I made a fundamental error in communicating with a person with Alzheimer's...I forgot that the importance was the feelings behind the communication, not the content of the story. It didn't matter that I wasn't able to follow her story what did matter



was helping her process her experiences that day. People with dementia quite often communicate with emotion and behavior. For whatever reason, this lady found much of what she saw as funny, but others could find it confusing, frightening or overwhelming. The important thing is to concentrate on the emotion behind the communication because quite often the feelings behind the words are more important than what is being said.

Alzheimer's disease impacts a person's ability to remember things, pay attention, focus, use proper judgment and make the right decision. These are the fundamental skills you need to communicate effectively. The person with Alzheimer's may have a hard time understanding or remembering what others say. They may also have difficulty turning their own thoughts into words. These losses create barriers to com-

**DO's**

- Give short, one sentence explanations
- Allow plenty of time for comprehension, and then triple it.
- Repeat instructions or sentences exactly the same way.
- Eliminate “but” from your vocabulary, substitute “nevertheless”
- Avoid insistence, try again later.
- Agree with them or distract them to a different subject of activity.
- Accept the blame when something is 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. Go with the flow.
- Practice 100% forgiveness. Memory loss progresses daily.

DON'Ts

- Don't reason
- Don't argue
- Don't confront
- Don't take it personally
- Don't question recent memory.
- Don't remind them they forget.

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munication, often causing the person to feel lonely and cut off from the world.

Even though a person might have Alzheimer's there is still a lot of things you can do to help them process these fragments of thoughts and emotions and use communication to make them feel more at peace in the confusing world around them. Here are a few suggestions that are easy to do and incorporate into your care of someone you know with Alzheimer's:

Reduce Distractions. Reducing distractions might be something simple like making a few changes in the home environment like creating time and a quiet place just for talking. Sometimes reducing visual distraction like a muted television or a bright light might help someone communicate more effectively.

Keep it simple and positive! This might not be as easy as it sounds. What might seem clear and upbeat to you might feel different to someone with Alzheimer's. You will learn as you communicate more and more. Keep your sentences short, consistent and to the point. Focus on communicating what you would like them to do, not what you don't want them to do. For example you might tell them “put the soap on the washcloth” instead of “don't put the soap in the sink”.

Remember that communication is more than just words. There are many ways to communicate that are meaningful and personal. Speak in a low calm voice. This communicates that there is nothing alarming, and everything is how it should be. Maintain eye contact and a pleasant facial

expression. This communicates that you are listening and interested. Touch the person, reaching out to hold their hand or touch their shoulder not only communicates that you are listening, but also that you care.

Help them communicate with you. Remember that a person with Alzheimer's *wants* to communicate with you, but they need your help. Recap and complete what you just heard the person say...repeat their words exactly. Or just repeat the last word. This is especially helpful if the person forgets what they were saying mid-sentence. If you notice that they may be searching for the right word, try taking a guess and try to supply the right word. Sometime that can get them unstuck and help them continue. Keep in mind that they words they use might not reflect what they want. For example, “go home” might mean that they are feeling nervous and need comforting and reassurance.

Practice these techniques and learn what works and what doesn't. Effective communication is not only a way to convey information, but can be a way to help a person feel more at ease with their condition.

References

- Beck, C. (1992). Interventions to improve skills of the cognitively disabled. *Provider*, (18) 41.
- Beck, C. & Heacock, P. (1988). Nursing interventions for patients with Alzheimer's disease. *Nursing Clinics of North America*, (23), 95-124.
- Larkin, M. (1994). *When someone you love have Alzheimer's: what you must know, what you can do, what you should expect.*

**Tools to learn more about Communication**

- Pick up a copy of [Compassionate Communication with Memory Impaired](#) from the Alzheimer's Association office.
- Kohler, S. 2004. How to Communicate with Alzheimer's. Granny's Rocker Publishing, Venice CA. Robinson, A, Spencer, B. White, L. 2002. Understanding Difficult Behaviors. Eastern Michigan University.