

Communication and Social Engagement: Inherently Linked



Kimberly Mueller
Ph.D., CCC-SLP

Join us for a special program, **Healthy Living with Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI): The Importance of Social Engagement and Strategies for Improved Communication**. Guest speaker, Kimberly Mueller, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, UW-Madison, will lead the virtual program about how to help people with MCI better communicate and how that supports positive social engagement and quality of life. The program, **Friday, May 20 from 9:30–11:30 a.m.**, is designed for both caregivers and those living with MCI, and will be interactive in nature.

Role of Communication in fostering Social Engagement

“Socialization is such an important factor for someone living with MCI,” Mueller said. “Ultimately, the more social you are, the better your outcomes will be on your journey. But we need to understand the role communication plays in the ability to socialize. With MCI, communication tends to be affected a lot earlier than many people think. And if you’re having challenges communicating, like following along in conversations, or thinking of words, you might tend to withdraw and be less socially active. We want to provide communication strategies for those living with MCI, and their care partners, to help them stay involved in social engagement opportunities. Ultimately, this leads to a richer support system, and a better quality of life.”

Caregiver tips for communication

“For those living with MCI, memory affects how they will communicate,” Mueller said. “Loved ones may forget words or not be able to finish sentences and there is a tendency to want to help them finish their thoughts. But this approach can be frustrating to a loved one with memory issues and there are strategies for the most effective ways to communicate with people who are having memory issues. When communicating, care partners can:

- **Keep things simple** – Reduce the amount of words you use and speak in simple terms.
- **Speak slower** – If someone is talking quickly or putting lots of sentences together, it can be hard to follow.
- **Consider visual supports** – One strategy is to create a memory book full of things the person loves or things they’ve done. It is easy to flip through to reflect, and use the visual aids to help prompt your loved one.
- **Don’t quiz your loved one** – Avoid phrases such as “don’t you remember” or asking too many questions, as it can be frustrating.

Case in Point: John wanted to talk about a movie he had seen, but he was having trouble remembering the movie name and the actors who appeared. He was pausing and struggling, so his care partner jumped in and gave him the names. This can be very frustrating for John to be talked over and he may tend to shut down. One strategy the care partner could have used would be to offer him a few choices of movie/actor names, or ask him if he’d like help thinking of the word.

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Research Focus

Kimberly Mueller, PhD, CCC-SLP, is an assistant professor in the UW-Madison Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders and an investigator in the Wisconsin Alzheimer's Disease Research Center. In addition to teaching multiple masters level classes, Mueller also has a research lab that focuses on understanding the neural mechanisms and behavioral aspects of speech and language changes across the spectrum of normal aging, preclinical Alzheimer's disease, Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI), Alzheimer's disease and dementia. In addition, she is on the evaluation team for the Wisconsin Registry for Alzheimer's Prevention (WRAP) and has helped track communication levels for participants for more than a decade.

Healthy Living is a bimonthly support and educational series at the Wisconsin Alzheimer's Disease Research Center for patients and families living with MCI. Free and open to the public, the series offers patients and families support, guidance, and science-backed strategies for living with a diagnosis of MCI. This program is co-sponsored by the Wisconsin Alzheimer's Disease Research Center and the Alzheimer's Association. Register for this program at: go.wisc.edu/394r59



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