

Tips for Communicating When Your Loved One has Dementia

Adapted from an article by Mariana Conti featured in YHC Magazine, Dec.2013 (yhconnection.com)

Remove Distractions – It's difficult for someone who is cognitively impaired to focus on a conversation while the television is on, the phone is ringing or when several other people are talking in the background. You'll have much better luck getting your message across if you approach the person in a quiet, stress-free environment.

Make Sure You Have Their Attention – Some types of dementia can damage peripheral vision or the ability to see things out of the corner of your eye. When you want to speak to your loved one, stand or kneel directly in front of them and make eye contact before speaking. If you are still not sure they are aware of your presence, touch them gently on the hand, shoulder or knee.

Keep It Simple – When we give someone instructions, we're used to stuffing several tasks into one sentence. "Finish tying your shoes, get your coat on, grab your purse and meet me in the car". This much information at one time will only confuse your loved one further. Instead, use simple, short words and introduce no more than one new thought per sentence. This allows them to focus on one task at a time. Don't be discouraged if you have to repeat each instruction more than once.

Remember the Power of Nonverbal Communication – Numerous studies have shown the words we say represent only a small portion of what we actually communicate to another person. Most of our communication consists of facial expressions, posture, gestures and tone of voice. If your loved one is struggling with language, you can still connect with them by offering a smile, a friendly arm about the shoulders, or a gentle physical prompt such as handing them the sock you would like them to put on.

Listen – Never forget – communication is a two-way street. If they are trying to tell you something, either verbally or non-verbally, take some time to tune in and try to decipher the message. Don't get discouraged if you don't catch on right away. Also, don't feel like you have to fix their problems or somehow make everything alright – you can't. Sometimes quiet compassion is the best response you can offer.

Avoid Arguments – People with dementia may develop fixed, untrue beliefs called elusions. An 85-year-old woman, for instance, might insist she just had lunch with her mother. The best response is to react to the feelings behind the statement. For instance, instead of saying, "Don't be silly. Your mother is dead," try saying, "Tell me about your mother," or "I guess mealtimes around here can get pretty lonely".

Don't Draw Attention to Memory Lapses – A person with dementia often withdraws into their own private world rather than taking the risk of making an embarrassing mistake in public. You can encourage them to keep making the effort to communicate with others by praising their efforts, even if they use the wrong word or don't get all the facts right.

Use a Communication Board – A communication board is a chalkboard or dry erase board. One side features the ABCs and the numbers one through 10. The other side features sketches of common things people might need such as the toilet, food, water, the television or the nurse. Even if your loved one has forgotten the exact words, chances are good they can still recognize the pictures and point to the things they need for comfort and companionship.

Communicating During End-Stage Dementia – Dementia is a cruel disease and, ultimately, a fatal one. Eventually, the person with dementia loses almost all of their vocabulary. At this point in the disease process, you may be tempted to stop visiting, convinced there is nothing more you can do to reach your loved one. This is a mistake. Although they may not be able to communicate their thoughts or feelings, they can still be comforted by your familiar presence and voice. You may even be able to spark a memory by singing their favorite songs and hymns, reading passages aloud from a special book, or talking about humorous incidents in your family's past. You can also connect with them during this time by simply sitting quietly and holding their hand. Remember that touch is also a form of communication.

Communicating with a loved one who has dementia takes creativity and perseverance. Another challenge in providing dementia care is dealing with behavioral issues that may appear in certain phases of the disease process.