



Common Problems Associated with Alzheimer's Disease

Communication

People with dementia should be encouraged to communicate in whatever way they can. The desire to stay in touch may be because you love them, or feel a sense of duty or responsibility towards them; possibly a mixture of both. Communication will help improve their quality of life and enable them to preserve their own feelings of identity for as long as possible. However, continual sensitive and tactful support from carers is essential. The following suggestions may be useful.

Each person with dementia is different and you will want to try out various ways of communicating to find out what works best at any particular stage.

As dementia progresses, you will probably need to do more to initiate communication. You may find that the person is more responsive when you are helping them with an activity, or you may be able to arouse their interest through asking them about the past or by looking at old photos or at objects that might remind them of their former work, hobbies or interests.

It is important to remember that words are not the only means of communicating. We convey a great deal of information about our mood and feelings by our tone of voice and expressions and through gestures and touch.

You will need to rely more on these non-verbal means of communicating as the person with dementia experiences increasing difficulty in understanding or using words.

There may come a time when the person can hardly communicate at all and perhaps forgets your name and who you are. This is part of the illness but you are likely to feel very distressed and to need a lot of support.

Tips to help with communication

Gaining attention

- Make sure you have the person's attention before you start to communicate. Face them.

- Try to make eye contact with the person with dementia as this will help focus their attention.
- Make sure that you are close enough for them to see the movements of your mouth or any gestures you use.
- Make sure there are no competing noises or activities, such as other people's conversations. If the radio or television is on, turn it off or take the person to a quieter place.
- As some people with dementia have problems with recognising family and friends, it may be necessary to remind the person who you are.

Body language

- Try to remain calm and still while you are communicating. It shows you are giving your full attention and have time to spend. Moving around will be distracting.
- Brusque or hurried movements or a tense expression may upset the person with dementia and make it more difficult to communicate. Try to find ways to relax so you are unflustered.
- The person's expression and the way they move or hold themselves may give you clues as to what they are feeling or trying to communicate.

Speaking

- Speak slowly, clearly and calmly. Never shout or use a sharp tone, as this will cause distress. Remember that using different tones can result in the same message being interpreted in different ways.
- Use short, simple sentences and allow time for the person to take in what you have said or reply.
- Ask questions one at a time so that the person can indicate 'yes' or 'no'. Too many questions at once will be confusing.
- You may need to repeat what you have said more slowly and emphasise the most important words.

Listening

- Listen carefully to what the person is saying. Be encouraging without being patronising.
- If they have difficulty in finding a word or finishing a sentence, ask them to explain in a different way, or guess the meaning and ask if you are right.
- If their speech has become hard to understand, use what you know about them and what you feel they might be trying to say to help you interpret. Always try to check back with them whether this is what they meant.

Other ways of communicating

- Use body movements such as pointing or demonstrating an action to help the person understand what you are saying. Of course, this should be done tactfully so the person does not feel you are treating them as a child.
- Encourage the person to use body movements to help you to understand.

Encourage spontaneity

- Humour can bring you closer, can release tension, and is good therapy. Laughing together over mistakes or misunderstandings can help.
- If the person seems sad, encourage them to express their feelings, and show you understand.

Showing respect

- Make sure that people do not speak down to the person with dementia or use childish words, however little they may seem to understand.
- Using someone's name in talking to them may keep their attention and help them to retain a sense of identity, but make sure people always address them politely and appropriately.
- Fact and fantasy can become confused as the dementia progresses. If it is necessary to disagree with the person, do so without making the person feel foolish. Often it is kinder to accept their reality than to contradict them.

Other difficulties

- Pain, discomfort, illness or the side-effects of medication can increase the person's confusion and make communication more difficult. Contact the GP if you suspect such a situation.
- Problems with sight, hearing or ill-fitting dentures can also make communication more difficult. Make sure that glasses are the correct prescription, that hearing aids are worn and are functioning properly and that dentures fit and are comfortable.

Keeping close

Affection can help to keep you close, particularly when conversation becomes more difficult. Holding the person's hand or sitting with an arm round them, if appropriate, or talking in a soothing voice are all ways of communicating that you care.

Finally, the affection and respect that you show towards the person for whom you care has the advantage of giving them more status in the eyes of others and increasing their chances of being treated as someone of worth by them.