



COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: WAYS TO MAXIMIZE SUCCESS WHEN COMMUNICATING WITH SOMEONE WITH DEMENTIA

Communication is a vital part of who we are as human beings.

People with dementia can communicate at every stage of their disease. Dementia is more than a neurobiological disease – it has social and interactional elements which mean that function, competence and quality of life are influenced by supportive or non-supportive features of the environment and by how others interact with the person.

Behaviour is a means of communication. “When words are lost, communication becomes behavioural.”

Sometimes “**responsive behaviours**” occur as a result of communication difficulties. “**They won’t resist if you don’t insist.**”

To communicate effectively with a person living with dementia, we need to be authentic and mean what we say. People with dementia often have strong intuition. Even if we try to hide it, they are likely to recognize when we are frustrated or tired or when we just don’t want to listen. Communication is not so much about what you say, but how you say it.

To maximize the opportunity for positive communication, a person-centred care approach is recommended.

We communicate in three ways:

1. Verbally -The words we speak.
2. Non-verbally -Our body language (facial expression, posture and gesture).
3. Para-verbally -The tone, pacing and volume of our voice.

93% of how we communicate is non-verbal, “**...communication is not so much about what you say, but how you say it.** When caring for a person who has dementia and who is having difficulty communicating this is especially true.”

Depending on the type and cause of dementia, communication difficulties may include:

- Reduced vocabulary
- Word-finding difficulty
- Problems with reasoning
- Repetition of thoughts

- Lack of coherence
- Losing track of topic
- Distractibility Problems with understanding what is said to them
- Lack of awareness of people around them talking to them

✂ For “related dementias” such as Frontotemporal and Parkinson’s: Reduced speech volume, perseverative speech, stuttering, loss of ability to use grammar correctly, hesitant speech with pauses, inability to recognize words.

Other communication difficulties may include:

- Writing and reading skills may deteriorate.
- Losing the normal social conventions of a conversation (may interrupt, ignore another speaker, or not respond when spoken to).
- Problems expressing emotions appropriately.
- Loss of filters (eg: may seem to be rude or speak inappropriately to a stranger)
- Inability to be empathetic – may appear uncaring and self-centred

Behaviours may arise as a result of the individual with dementia not being able to communicate with people around them.

The person with dementia is ***transmitting a message/need/problem via their behaviour that something is not right.***

We reframe these behaviours as ***“responsive or protective behaviours”***

When behaviours are reframed as responsive, it directs caregivers to search for the meaning of the behaviour and provide care in a way that is respectful and person-centred.

People with dementia who have communication difficulties may become isolated, neglected and excluded from social activities -

When they are ignored or isolated, their needs, abilities and strengths are not acknowledged and supported, this leads to a sense of helplessness and ***excess disability***; loss of abilities not related to the physiological losses caused by dementia rather loss of abilities from lack of participation and involvement, ***“Use it or Lose it”***

Person-Centred Care Approach to Communication:

Person-centred care values people with dementia as individuals with unique histories, values, likes, beliefs and strengths.

Care includes a person’s abilities, preferences, and choices. Providing person-centred care moves beyond the physical act of providing care and involves the whole person and their social, cultural and individual identify.

For Health Care workers:

- Allow people from other cultures/backgrounds time to explain. Check with that person to be sure that you got the information correct. You can form it as a question. (*ie. Mr. Wong, do you want me to go and get your glasses?*”).
- Learn a few words in the languages of the people that you care for to not only connect with them, but to give them information about what you need them to do (i.e. learn the words bath and dinner in French).

A SUCCESSFUL PERSON-CENTRED CARE APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION INCLUDES:

Believing communication is possible

- Communication is possible at all stages of dementia.
- What a person says, does and how they behave is a way to communicate and there is meaning behind these things.
- No matter what the person does or says, treat them with respect and dignity.
- Always listen actively – sometimes the truth is hidden inside conversation that, on the surface, doesn't seem to make sense.

Focusing on the person's abilities and skills

- Although there are cognitive deficits with dementia, the person's emotions and feelings will remain.
- Focusing on their remaining skills and abilities will increase their quality of life and affects the way we see the person.
- If speech is lost or you are having a difficult time understanding the person with dementia, consider using alternative ways to help them express themselves (i.e. through art, gardening, and touch).
- Consider other ways the person may be able to communicate: computer, communication book, sign language, etc.

Reassuring and being positive

- Encourage the person when they are having trouble expressing themselves.
- Determine whether they prefer you to finish their sentence when they are struggling, or stay silent and wait for them to finish their thought unaided.
- Move away from criticizing, correcting, and ignoring and be supportive and positive.
- *“Be a guide, not a parent”* – never start a sentence with the words *“no”* or *“don't”*.
- Laughter and humour go a long way in diffusing a challenging situation. Distraction and re-direction are often good choices.

Meeting the person where they are and accepting their reality

- The reality of a person with dementia may be very different than our own reality.
- Individuals with dementia are not able to enter our world; therefore, caregivers must enter into the world of the person with dementia.
- *“It is easier to change the environment than to expect the person with dementia to change.”*

- Try to meet the person where they are. Leave your agenda at the door.
- Avoid confronting/convincing the person with dementia that what they are experiencing is untrue.
- Trying to bring them back into our reality (reality orientation) or disagreeing with the person with dementia will cause them to become even more confused or upset.
- If the person says something that you know is untrue, try to find ways around the situation instead of reacting by correcting or disagreeing, validate the person's feelings.

Validation helps the caregiver understand the meaning behind the message from the person with dementia.

- The caregiver enters the world of the person with dementia and validates their emotions/thoughts/feelings in whatever time or place that is real to that person.
- The caregiver listens to the emotional message behind the person's behaviour and validates how they are feeling.
- Do not argue with a person if they are insisting something is true that you know is not.
- Listen to the message and try to find the meaning behind what they are saying.
- Allow the person with dementia to express themselves.
- **"Remember to Connect and not to Correct"** Always respond to repetitive questions with patience, in a caring, reassuring manner. No matter how many times the person asks the question – to them, it is the first time they have asked it.

Redirection might be helpful.

- Redirection may also be used as a way to help communicate with a person with dementia.
- Redirection can be positive or negative.
- Negative redirection happens when you dismiss someone or ignore what they are trying to tell you.

For example, ***"You don't need your purse" or "Don't worry about it."***

- Positive redirection validates and joins in on what a person is thinking and feeling.

SUCCESSFUL REDIRECTION CAN BE DONE IN FOUR STEPS:

Validate the person's reality, or what they are feeling or thinking, eg. ***"You think that someone has taken your keys. I can understand why you are angry."***

Join the person where they are and listen to their point of view, eg. ***"You need to look really hard for those keys? I lost my book. Let's look together."***

Distract the person by pointing their attention to something else, eg. ***"Let's look for your keys by the piano."***

Redirect them by engaging them in an enjoyable activity, eg. ***"I love it when you play Amazing Grace. Could you play it for me?"***

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES:

Caring Approach

- People with dementia are very sensitive to how we look, act, the tone of our voice, our body position, etc. How we present will affect our relationship with the person that we are caring for.
- Using a friendly, calm, relaxed approach will put the individual at ease even if they do not understand what you are saying.
- Address the person by their preferred name which may not necessarily be the name you have always called him/her. This may be a name that they responded to in the past; a nickname from childhood, a formal name from their place of work or profession.
- Be flexible
- Never use a controlling manner or an authoritarian tone.
- Do not argue
- Remain calm – ask for help if you are frustrated
- Be patient
- Listen carefully and do not interrupt
- Make communication a two way street
- Encourage humour and laughter
- Respect sadness

Avoid:

- Using generic terms like “lovie”, “dearie”, “pet”.
- Abstract language.
- Literal phrases (i.e. I am going to put the person in room 306 down) which may confuse the person with dementia.
- Modern slang.

Talking Clearly

Persons with dementia have difficulty in remembering and interpreting information. As the disease progresses, the ability to manage complex information declines. To make communication successful, the message that you send needs to be short and simple.

- Use simple, short sentences.
- Speak at an appropriate volume. Do not yell.
- Give one direction/piece of information at a time.

- Give enough time for the person with dementia to process information (**10-20 seconds minimum**). Never **“outpace”** the person with dementia – meaning that you are multi-tasking, speaking too quickly, etc.
- Speak slowly and clearly – gage your pace by the reaction of the person with dementia.
- Use words that the person with dementia understands, knows or is familiar with.
- Never speak “over” the person as you care for them.
- Do not speak to the person with your back turned or from a different room.
- Always introduce what you are doing prior to beginning a task.

The Right Environment

Often times, the person with dementia is over-stimulated in an environment that has **“too much going on.”**

To make the environment more conducive to enhancing communication try:

- Turning off the TV, Radio, CD player.
- Taking the person to a quiet area if you are not able to minimize the background noise to have a conversation.
- Staying still while you are talking; the more the person can focus on you the better.
- Ensuring hearing aids are on and that they have batteries in them, and the volume is at an appropriate level; not squealing, but not turned down too low
- Ensuring that the person with dementia is wearing their glasses.

Body Language

Because **people with dementia receive over 93% of their information about their world through non-verbal communication**, it is important that caregivers understand how strongly these individuals rely on non-verbal communication to interpret the world around them. Body Language is always present. It can either be positive or negative. The following tips on body language may help enhance communication:

- Be observant of the body language you present. You may be saying one thing, but body language could suggest another.
- Ensure that the person with dementia realizes that you are there. Make eye contact before saying anything (where culturally appropriate).
- Remember their field of vision is narrowing so be in front of them at eye level when you speak
- Smile.
- Do not stand directly over top of the person with dementia.
- Crouch down to their level so that they don’t have to look up at you. (or face them directly if both are standing)
- Use hand gestures and other visual cues to communicate.
- Provide touch and contact (as appropriate).

- Be aware of the space between you and the person, they may not be comfortable with you in their ***“whisper zone” or “personal space”***
- Try to avoid body language that conveys that you are frustrated, angry and in a hurry (even if you are!). eg. sighing, shaking fingers or fists, rolling eyes.

Using the Appropriate Words

It is essential for the care giver to use words that the person relates to and is able to understand.

- Talk to the person as an adult.
- Use words that the person knows.
- Use close ended questions when engaging the person in tasks.
- Use open ended questions when you want to open up conversation.
- Watch for signs of frustration; this means that your approach is not working and could be confusing for the person
- Use words that are positive, encouraging and reassuring.
- Use visual cues and pictures if you are struggling to get a message across.
- Ask “yes/no” questions when open-ended questions cause frustration.

***Lori Amdam RN, MSN. and Sandie Somers Clinical Nurse Specialist, Seniors Strategy
May 2018***