

## Communication and Dementia: an Introduction

### Introduction

The brain is extraordinarily complex. It is made up of several distinct parts (lobes), each with its own function. While these parts are separate, they must work together to complete the simplest task. As Alzheimer's disease and related dementias affect all areas of the brain, certain functions or abilities will be lost, and the person's ability to communicate will be affected.

Dementia has a profound effect on language. People with dementia eventually lose their verbal abilities (both the ability to speak and to understand what is said to them), but they do not lose the capacity to read non-verbal messages. Therefore, it is important to always be aware of body language and what your body and face are communicating. Harsh glances can be just as hurtful as harsh words.

### How We Communicate

Communication is the way we share information or exchange ideas. As human beings, we need the contact, reassurance, and stimulation of interacting with others. Communication requires at least two people (a sender and a receiver). When one person conveys a message, the other person is expected to convey a response. This is how we interact with each other. When an individual has dementia, he/she may not be able to send or receive a message effectively. It is up to the partner in communication to make the interaction successful.

Communication can be verbal (what is said) and non-verbal.

Some examples of non-verbal communication are:

- Facial expressions (e.g. smiles, frowns, grimaces)
- Gestures (e.g. hand waving, pointing)
- Tone of voice (e.g. low, high, loud)
- Eye movement (e.g. rolling of eyes, winking, refusing to make eye contact)
- Touch (e.g. soothing hand on shoulder, push on the back)
- Body language (e.g. arms folded, facing the person or turned away, tapping foot)



Communicating with a person with dementia requires belief, creativity, understanding, patience and skill:

- **Belief** that every person, regardless of abilities, maintains a core of self that can be reached;
- **Creativity** in expressing the message;
- **Understanding** the effect of the disease on communication;
- **Patience** to slow down, listen, watch, wait for a response, repeat a phrase;
- **Skill** to convey messages or feelings effectively.

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## Getting a Message Across

### REDUCE DISTRACTIONS

Communicating is always easier if other things are not happening at the same time. When trying to get your message across, make sure that there are few or no distractions. For example, if the TV or radio is on, ask to turn it off. Ensure that only one person is speaking to the person with dementia at a time.

### GET THE PERSON'S ATTENTION/MAKE EYE CONTACT



Approach the person slowly and from a slight angle. Do not approach the person directly from the front, as this can appear threatening.

Make sure the person is aware that you are approaching by knocking on the door, saying hello or saying the person's name. If necessary, sit or kneel at eye level with the person. Keeping eye contact (if culturally appropriate) will help the person know who is speaking and may assist the person in concentrating on the message.

### SPEAK SLOWLY AND CLEARLY

Use simple words and short sentences to keep the message clear. If the person has hearing problems, lowering the pitch of your voice is often more effective than increasing your volume.

### GIVE ONE MESSAGE AT A TIME

Too many thoughts or ideas at one time can become confusing. Check to make sure that the person with dementia has understood you before moving on to a new idea. For example, watch the person's facial expressions to see if the person's face looks calm or looks confused.

### SHOW AND TALK

Use actions as well as words. For example, hold up a glass of water and ask: "Would you like a drink of water?"

### BE PATIENT

Allow the person time to respond. Interrupting can discourage further communication. When a person has dementia, it can take the brain a longer amount of time to process information.

### AVOID OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

It is usually better to ask close-ended questions rather than open-ended questions. Close-ended questions can be answered with "yes", "no", "maybe" or "I don't know" or "I don't remember".

#### Close-ended (Use):

- "Do you want to wear your red sweater?"
- "Would you like to go for a walk with me?"
- "Does the sandwich taste good?"

#### Open-ended (Don't Use):

- "Why did you do that?"
- "What do you want to wear today?"



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## **VALIDATE THE PERSON'S FEELINGS**

Emotional responses develop and change over a lifetime, based on an individual's experiences. People with dementia do not lose their capacity for emotion. Emotions may be the only means through which an individual with dementia can interpret what is happening around them. It is important that we help people with dementia to express their emotions. For example, if a person is scared by a hallucination, we need to recognize that the fear is real even if the reason for that fear is not.

## **COMMUNICATING WITH EMOTION**

We all communicate by emotion, expression and touch. Holding a hand, or smiling when talking, can convey more than words.

## **DO NOT TALK ABOUT THE PERSON WITH DEMENTIA AS IF THEY ARE NOT THERE**

We do not know how much a person is able to understand, especially in the later stages of the disease. Quality of life for people with dementia (indeed for anyone) is largely determined by their interactions and relationships with others. Be sure to talk to the individual as much as possible.

## **DO NOT ARGUE OR REASON WITH THE PERSON WITH DEMENTIA**

Arguing will lead to more difficulties. People with dementia perceive and interpret the world differently. Instead of arguing with the person with dementia to see the world as we see it, try to enter their reality by looking at the world as they see it.

## **Never Give Up**

Positive interactions and having meaningful relationships with others is very important for people with dementia. Quality of life for all people, including those with dementia, is largely dependant on maintaining these connections, which can be a complex and challenging process. Some days will be better than others.

If you have any questions, please email us at [pec@alzheimerontario.org](mailto:pec@alzheimerontario.org)