

Communication

1. What is communication?
 - The exchange of information, ideas and emotions
 - It involves sending and receiving messages. It is how we relate to each other.
 - Through communication we convey our thoughts, wishes and feelings. It helps us express who we are.
 - Communication is more than just talking...it involves attitude, tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language.
2. Why is our communication style important with individuals who have dementia?
 - Individuals with dementia experience changes in the way they express themselves and in the way they understand others.
 - By becoming more aware of our personal communication styles, we can enhance our communication with individuals suffering from dementia.
 - By making changes to improve our communication with these individuals, we can improve their quality of life, decrease behavioral problems, and make our jobs/caregiving easier.
3. What is your communication style? (See “Communication Styles”)
 - Everyone has a different way of interacting with others. Some people are more aware of their style than others (Analyzing, Supporting, Promoting or Controlling).
 - A well functioning team needs all aspects of communication styles in order to be effective. We all have aspects of each style within us. Some of us can easily move from one style to another and adapt our

style to the needs of the situation at hand, whether the focus needs to be on tasks or relationships. For others, our dominant style is very evident and it is more challenging to see the situation from the perspective of another style.

- The good news about communication styles is that we all have the ability to develop flexibility in our styles. The greater the flexibility we have, the more skilled we usually are at handling possible and actual conflicts. Usually it has to be relevant to us to do so, either because we think it is important or because there are incentives in our environment to encourage it. The key is that we have to want to.

4. What is the best way to communicate with individuals suffering from dementia?

- First, evaluate the individual for hearing and vision loss, if possible. Do not automatically assume that communication problems are the direct result of dementia.
- When approaching someone, approach from the front and speak at face-to-face height. This will better ensure that you have the person's attention before you begin speaking, so he/she can attend to what you are saying.
- Maintain eye contact to help individual focus.
- Ask one question at a time to avoid confusion.
- Allow adequate time for an answer. If the individual does not seem to understand, repeat the question using the same wording. If this does not work, after a few minutes, rephrase it.
- Ask "yes"/"no" questions. They simplify communication by making it clear what answer is expected.

- Speak slowly and clearly. And when in the presence of a confused person, speak in their language to minimize confusion.
- Give one-step directions. Telling somebody to do several things at once can be overwhelming and leave him/her wondering what you want him/her to do.
- Reduce choices when seeking an answer.
- Use specific nouns and names, not pronouns.
- Keep sentences short, no more than six words.
- Break down the sequence of tasks into steps to avoid increasing confusion. (Ex. to help individual understand how to brush teeth: Walk to the bathroom. Pick up your toothbrush. Get the toothpaste. Squeeze the toothpaste onto the toothbrush. Put the toothbrush in your mouth and brush.)
- Be consistent in word choices. Use words the individual is familiar with.
- Avoid controlling language.
- Make negatives more positive. Instead of saying “You can’t go through that door” say “Let’s go this way instead.”
- Even when verbal and comprehension skills fail, individuals can still benefit from non-verbal communication: body language, facial expressions, voice tone and gestures, to help convey what you want done.
- Give visual cues through pointing and touching. For example, demonstrate actions such as brushing your teeth.
- Avoid quizzing the individual. Reminiscence is positive, but avoid asking specific questions that the person cannot answer.
- Provide simple explanations to questions.

- Write things down. Repetitive questions can be avoided by having a written reminder for the person.
- Turn questions into answers. Instead of asking “Do you have to go to the bathroom?” anticipate the individual’s needs and say “The bathroom is here.”
- Be aware of your tone. Use a gentle, relaxed voice to reassure the individual.
- If the individual becomes upset or uncooperative, stop and try again later.
- Be aware of your feelings and attitude.
- Pay attention to your body language. Be aware of your stance and use positive, friendly expressions.
- As an individual’s ability to process verbal information declines, the importance of how caregivers communicate increases.
- Remember, it’s not what you say, but how you say it!

5. Strategies to deal with behavior problems:

- Pay attention to what the individual with dementia is saying-both verbally and non-verbally.
- Be aware of your communication techniques, including providing one-step instructions and speaking in a reassuring tone.
- Understand that trying to argue with someone who has dementia can only result in frustration for both you and the resident.
- Distract and divert attention whenever possible.
- Hold to the same routine.
- Keep things simple to avoid frustration.
- Promote a sense of security and comfort.
- Use positive reinforcements, such as smiles, a gentle touch, personal attention and praise.

- Allow the individual to have some sense of control. Being able to “save face” is important to someone who is confused.
- Maintain a calm manner even when the individual becomes aggressive or agitated. This can defuse a tense situation and help reduce a person’s fears.

- Remember that behavior problems result from disease. Do not take things that the person says and does personally; it is the disease speaking.

Some potential causes of problem behaviors:

- *Reaction to loss.* We all rely on input from our environment to guide us in activities and relationships. An individual with dementia has lost both the benefit of such input and the ability to inform us of their internal world. This absence causes fear, insecurity and frustration, which may present in the form of aggression and agitated behavior.

- *Inability to meet basic needs.* As a result of cognitive impairment and psychiatric symptoms, a person’s basic needs might not be met. The resulting hunger, dehydration, elimination problems and fatigue can produce behavioral changes. Individuals with dementia may stay hungry because of, for example, their inability to feed themselves, depression or loss of muscle coordination. They may show their discomfort through agitated and aggressive behavior.

- Co-existing medical problems. Monitor for pain and discomfort which can lead to increased agitation.

- Co-existing psychiatric problems. Individuals with a previous diagnosis of psychiatric disorders are likely to exhibit more behavioral problems when they develop dementia. Those with hallucinations or delusions and are depressed or manic tend to exhibit more aggressive and agitated behavior.
 - *Environmental factors*. Excessive noise, poor or glaring lighting, cold temperatures and over-crowding in a group environment can increase agitation, screaming and aggressive behavior. Any change in the environment or routines, such as bathing or eating, can cause frustration and agitation.
 - *Sensory impairment*. Individuals with hearing or visual impairments tend to be more paranoid, hallucinate more and feel more frightened and frustrated.
 - *Factors related to the caregiver*. A caregiver's attitude and knowledge of dementia affect the care of individuals with the disease. The more one knows about dementia, the less likely they will be to resent certain behavioral problems. Individuals usually respond to a caregiver's mood and behavior accordingly.
6. What is the best way to communicate with individuals who are hearing impaired?
- Approach the individual from the front, not behind them.
 - Stand directly in front of the person when speaking so he/she can read your lips.
 - Get his/her attention by saying name and gently touching.

- Speak slowly and clearly and use a lower tone of voice. Most individuals who are hearing impaired can hear certain tones better than others so raising your voice will not necessarily make you better heard.
- Use non-verbal communication such as pointing or gesturing.
- Write things down, if needed.
- If the individual has a hearing aide, encourage him/her to wear it and check the battery often.

7. What is the best way to communicate with individuals who are visually impaired?

- Avoid startling the person. Try to make your presence known as you approach.
- Identify yourself as you approach and indicate where you are standing.
- Inform the individual of your intentions before you proceed.
- Use large print or audiotape materials if available. If the individual does not have such materials, look into applying to the Library for the Blind and Handicapped.
- Avoid loud noises or sudden movements.