

Care Partner Information

Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia Caregiving Tips

Improving Communication

How can you improve day-to-day conversations with people who have dementia?

Simplify your Talk

Keep sentences short. Only talk about one topic at a time. Long sentences that say lots of things are hard for someone with dementia to understand.

Here's an example of a sentence that is hard to understand, "We're going to have dinner before we watch television because I'm hungry." Instead, you could simply say, "Let's have dinner!"

If there are still problems understanding, try repeating. But when you repeat, use different words to say the same thing. For example, you could say, "We're going to have dinner now." If the person still doesn't understand, try saying, "We are going to eat chicken now." Saying things different ways is helpful for a person with dementia.

But Don't Use Baby Talk

"Baby talk" uses a tone that people use when talking to babies. It uses very short sentences ("Eat now" "Dinner"). It also uses childish words ("choo-choo" instead of "train") or pet names ("sweetie"). Don't use baby talk when talking to people with dementia. It can make them feel bad.

Be Respectful

People with dementia want to have real conversations. To make this happen, always respond when they talk to you, even if what they say doesn't make sense. It's OK if you don't know what they are talking about. The important thing is that you are talking together. It makes them feel valued and respected.

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and promotoras care for someone with Alzheimer's disease or related dementias. The information in the series offers general advice and does not distinguish between the different types of dementia.

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The tables below lists other ways to help communicate with people who have dementia and tips to use if the person gets upset.

Other Ways to Improve Communication	
Allow choice	Even simple decisions (“Would you like X or Y?”) offer a chance for choice. This gives control to a person who has little control.
Be specific	Use the name of objects or people when talking. Say “banana” rather than “this.” Say “Uncle Joe” instead of “him.” Avoid using phrases that people might not understand, like, “It’s raining cats and dogs.”
Orient	Face the person at their level while talking to them. Make eye contact.
Take time	Pause during conversations. Wait longer than normal for a response.
Use anything available	Photos, food, music, books, art, other people, or other objects can help open an opportunity to communicate.

Tips to Help If the Person Gets Angry or Upset	
Be positive	Smile. Emotions are contagious. Nod and say, “Yeah... uh huh” when the person with dementia is upset and trying to say something. A touch on the arm can help.
Distract	Offer something simple, like ice cream. That can often calm down someone who is angry or upset.
Stay calm	Speak slowly and in a calm manner, even when the other person is angry. Learn what is pleasing to the person, and use it as needed.
Wait	Most things don’t have to happen right away. If someone doesn’t want to bathe, it’s OK to wait. Try not to rush conversations or events.

Useful Websites

Alzheimer’s Association: <http://www.alz.org/care/dementia-communication-tips.asp>

Mayo Clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/caregivers/in-depth/alzheimers/art-20047540>

National Institutes of Aging: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/communication-and-behavior-problems-resources-alzheimers-caregivers>

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