



## Ten Tips to Effectively Communicate with Someone Living with Dementia

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### Good Communication is Key to Meaningful Connection

Communication involves the sending and receiving of information – speaking and listening with comprehension. People living with dementia have challenges in both areas, so we need to dig deeper to be understood and to fully comprehend what they are trying to communicate.

Communication breakdowns can be a source of frustration for people living with dementia and their caregivers. People living with dementia may struggle to find the right words or

use inappropriate words to explain what they mean. Beyond words, they may express themselves through gesturing, facial expressions and body language. When communication breaks down, unmet needs may manifest as undesirable responsive behaviors and significantly contribute to excess disability and lower quality of life for the person living with dementia.

# Try a New Approach

To successfully communicate with someone living with dementia you, not the person with dementia, must modify your approach. With patience and know-how, caregivers can retain the ability to effectively communicate with loved ones as they progress in their journey by making a few simple yet effective adjustments to how they interact.

By embracing the following ten tips on how to effectively communicate with someone living with dementia, caregivers can experience a closer, more satisfying connection with loved ones. What's more, improved communication can improve their loved one's ability to function, emotional well-being and quality of life.

## Ten Tips for Better Communication

### Tip #1: Gain their attention

Before speaking and stepping into their personal space (about 6 feet out), identify yourself and gain their attention and approval to proceed. This may be in the form of a non-verbal nod, a smile or the establishment of eye contact.

### Tip #2: Get at eye level and sit down next to them

Being at or even just below eye level helps the individual feel safe and in control. Position yourself to their side in a supportive stance versus standing in front of them, which can feel confrontational. Pay attention to your body language as well as theirs.

### Tip #3: Take your time

Avoid long, drawn out directives or descriptions and opt instead for short, simple sentences. Speak slowly and clearly. Give one directive at a time and remain patient, allowing ample time for the individual to comprehend then formulate a response. Try not to interrupt them even if you think you know what they are trying to say.



### Tip #4: Avoid pronouns

Referring to an item as "it," friends as "they" or a granddaughter as "she" may confuse someone living with dementia. Avoid using pronouns (those, them, they, his, her, etc.) and be specific in referring to items and individuals to avoid confusion and frustration.

### Tip #5: Use visual or tactile cues

Words alone may prove insufficient for effective communication with an individual living with dementia. Supplement a conversation with concrete items, pictures and demonstrations. These will help the individual to better make sense of what you are saying or asking and enable him to feel more successful in his efforts to comprehend and formulate a response.

### Tip #6: Join them in their reality

People living with dementia may become confused to time, place and person. Remain sensitive to this and refrain from attempting to challenge or correct misconceptions and false beliefs. Instead, offer reassurance and join them in their reality.

# Stay Connected Throughout the Journey

## Tip #7: Rephrase rather than repeat

If they appear confused, rephrase your statement or question rather than repeat. For example, asking, "Did you go?" may elicit the response, "Go where?" when you actually meant "did you take your turn?" Maintain an upbeat, friendly tone of voice if having to rephrase.

## Tip #8: Reassure with touch

If the individual is comfortable with touch, when appropriate, holding hands or offering a gentle pat while talking may be reassuring and provide a calming sense of comfort. Touch, in conjunction with facial expressions and tone of voice, can help convey your message while demonstrating your feelings of affection. Closely monitor their body language and listen carefully to what they say for any cues to discomfort.

## Tip #9: Pay attention to the environment and minimize distractions

People living with dementia have difficulty with sustained attention and concentration and consequently may be easily distracted by sounds and sights others can easily ignore. Scan your environment and minimize any unnecessary sources of visual and auditory stimulation. For example, turn off the TV, shut the door, close the curtains, etc. Stop what you are doing and give the individual your full attention as they attempt to speak.

## Tip #10: Ask yes or no questions

Open-ended questions that require abstract thought or the ability to organize and/or categorize information may overwhelm the individual. Instead, ask one question at a time. Asking simple yes or no questions that avoid too many choices will allow for more successful communication.



As people living with dementia progress in their journey, they will experience numerous brain changes, affecting their ability to interact with and make sense of their environment. Practice the ten tips for effective communication to help you and your loved one maintain understanding and a meaningful connection far into the disease process.



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