



ALZHEIMER'S FOUNDATION OF AMERICA

Communication Techniques

It's not what you say, but how you say it. This expression holds particularly true when communicating with individuals with dementia.

Alzheimer's disease and related illnesses impair a person's ability to understand words and to speak. However, the person can still benefit from non-verbal communication—body language, voice tone and facial expressions. As the individual's ability to process verbal information declines, the importance of how caregivers communicate with the person, verbally and non-verbally, increases.

Here are some tips to enhance interactions:

- Remember that the individual with dementia might be feeling confused, anxious, irritable and depressed, and suffering from low self-esteem.
- Speak in a tone that is calm and reassuring; talk slowly and distinctly; and use simple words.
- Approach the individual from the front. It may startle and upset him or her if you touch unexpectedly or draw near from behind.
- Before asking the individual to do something, address him or her by name to get the person's attention. While you are speaking, maintain eye contact.
- Ask only one question at a time and allow time for an answer. If he or she does not seem to understand, repeat the question using the same wording. If this does not work, after a few minutes, rephrase it.
- If the individual repeatedly asks a question, keep in mind that he or she cannot remember the response that you have just given. Instead of answering the question after a second or third repetition, reassure the individual in the same way- everything is fine, you will be with him or her, you will help.
- Eliminate distractions, such as the TV or radio, when talking to the person.
- Avoid statements that sound negative. For example, instead of "Don't go outside," say "Stay inside."
- Break down all tasks into simple steps. Tell the individual one step at a time what to do. If the individual gets upset and becomes uncooperative, stop and try again later.
- Use non-verbal gestures, when appropriate, to help convey what you want done. For example, point to objects or demonstrate, such as brushing your teeth.
- Smile- a smile sends a powerful message of reassurance.
- Use humor whenever possible, though not at the individual's expense.
- Keep on talking, even when a person may no longer be verbal. Chat about things that mattered to the person and mention names of family and friends. Even if the communication is one-sided, it can loudly show that you care.