

# COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

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People with dementia almost always experience some difficulty in verbal communication, in speaking and understanding what is said. Changes in speech and comprehension differ in their extent and nature depending on the type of dementia and the stage of the condition. Communication difficulties can be very frustrating for the person with dementia and their conversation partners.

In Alzheimer's disease, people start by forgetting the names of things and gradually speech becomes more empty or lacking in content. People retain the desire to communicate. In some frontal lobe conditions speech may be fluent, but meaningless, so that the listener cannot understand the message the person is attempting to convey; sometimes grammar is lost. After stroke, or with vascular dementia, the person may know what they want to say but not be able to produce the word or (infuriatingly) say the wrong one. They may understand what is being said but not be able to respond.

We need to remember that we communicate in ways other than speech. Our posture, gestures, facial expression, and tone of voice are other ways we get messages across. The person with dementia is very sensitive to emotional tone, so if you are angry, rushed, or anxious they will pick this up, be distracted or worried and it will be harder for them to understand what is being said. The point of communication is to understand another person, and this occurs best if both parties feel respected and can trust each other.

If English is the person's second language, this tends to be lost first and the person reverts back to their native tongue. Hence it would be useful to learn some key phrases in the original language.

## Some tips for communication:

- Make sure you have the person's attention before starting to speak- use their name.
- Check that hearing aides are turned on. Clean glasses will help the person to watch your lips.
- Ensure the person is comfortable (not in pain, tired, hungry, too hot or cold, wanting to go to the toilet) before attempting an important conversation.
- Be directly in front of the person with dementia so that they know where the voice is coming from.
- Be at the same level so you are not looking down on them.
- Minimise distractions like TV, radio, other people talking in the background.
- Make sure you are calm, otherwise the person will detect your anxiety and become anxious themselves.
- Speak clearly and give the person time to comprehend what has been said.
- Mention the topic of conversation and use the main topic word often. Have only one concept in each statement or question.
- Later it may be better to ask questions that may be answered by "yes" or "no" or give the person only two choices e.g. "the blue cardigan or the brown cardigan?"
- Suggesting lost words may help and some people appreciate the assistance. For others, however, it is frustrating if you finish sentences for them and get it wrong.
- Repeat as necessary, using the same words (and give the person time to process the words and respond). If that doesn't work try rephrasing your message.
- Use words that help to orientate the person such as "Your old boss, Peter ...", "your sister, Shirley..."

- Repeat words back so that you are sure you have understood. “You would like to wear the blue cardigan today?”
- Use gestures to reinforce your words e.g. pointing to something or holding it up.
- Visual aids can help communication greatly (photos, memos, objects, maps, written reminders).
- Make sure your body position is open and relaxed and that your facial expression and stance echo what your words are saying.
- Touch may reassure or help the person to understand.
- Take your time.
- Have a laugh at both of you when you can’t quite connect. Relax and try again.
- Try to enter into the world of the person with dementia and understand where they are coming from.
- Be positive saying “yes, and...” rather than “no” or “yes but...”
- Comment more, and question less.

### **DON'T**

- Rush them.
- Be bossy! No one responds well to being ordered to do something.
- Talk over the person as if they aren’t there.
- Ask complicated questions that the person can’t follow.
- Embarrass people by asking factual questions that they won’t be able to answer.

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This publication provides a general summary only of the subject matter covered. People should seek professional advice about their specific case. The content was adapted from Alzheimer’s Australia who have generously consented to their work being used. Written and peer reviewed: 2017 by Dr Chris Perkins and Dr Richard Worrall, Psychiatrists of Old Age. Reviewed by Dr Tina Crownshaw, Psychiatrist of Old Age 2023.

Dementia New Zealand offers support, information and education.

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