

## More Than Words

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According to recent estimates, as many as 5.1 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease. The risks of all forms of dementia increase with age. The number of people age 65 and older is expected to grow from 39 million in 2008 to 72 million in 2030, and the number of people diagnosed with dementia will grow proportionately. Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia are expected to pose significant physical and emotional challenges for more and more families and other caregivers—in addition to those with the disease. For everyone, good communication is key.

## Why is Communication Important?

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Very often people with dementia experience fear and confusion. They may not remember where they are, or recognize people once familiar to them. Simple tasks may cause great frustration. Any change in environment—be it location, noise level, people, routine, temperature, position or other seemingly benign shift in surroundings—can cause confusion, fear or discomfort. If the person has trouble communicating, it's up to those around him/her to determine what the problem is, and how to respond in a supportive way.

For those who care for someone with dementia, a different set of personal challenges emerge. Very often caregivers can feel exhausted, overwhelmed, stressed, isolated, sad and even guilty about feeling frustrated or resentful toward the person in their care. Caregivers need a source of ready support, acceptance and guidance as they do the extremely difficult work of caring for a loved one with dementia. How you communicate

with them can mean the difference between hope and despair.

## How Can I Communicate Better With My Loved One With Dementia?

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Communication is hard for people with dementia. They may struggle to find words or forget what they want to say. Below are some common communication problems caused by dementia and ways to be both helpful and supportive.

- **Trouble finding the right word when speaking.** This is a common problem. If given time, often the speaker can find a word or phrase that approximates what they want to say. Be patient and if she/he indicates openness, make suggestions.
- **Problems understanding what words mean.** You can use hand gestures, touch, pictures or objects to illustrate what you are communicating. Remember, words are only a small part of communication. Body language, tone and attitude are worth a thousand words.
- **Problems paying attention during long conversations.** Keep your communications short, succinct and concrete. Make direct eye contact; be appropriately animated to keep the listener's attention.
- **Loss of train-of-thought when talking.** If it is important, you can use verbal cues to help get the speaker back on track. If it isn't important, and if the speaker seems frustrated, change the subject by suggesting an alternative topic or activity.
- **Trouble remembering how to do familiar activities such as cooking a**

**meal, writing a check, getting dressed, or doing laundry.** Be accepting and noncritical. Offer simple step-by-step instructions and give the person time to understand and act. Be prepared to repeat instructions and perhaps break them down even further. Make sure you acknowledge the effort even if the end result isn't perfect.

- **Problems blocking out background noises from the radio, TV, telephone calls, or conversations in the room.** Make sure the person is dealing with only one thing at a time. If you are having a conversation, turn off the TV or radio. Keep distractions to a minimum.
- **Difficulty deciding.** Ask simple yes or no questions, and offer specific options. For example, rather than asking, "What would you like to do next?" ask "Would you like to walk or watch TV?"
- **Frustration if communication isn't working.** Again be supportive and noncritical. Give a warm touch or hug. Offer to take a break and promise to come back to the subject later. Lighten the mood with a smile, a joke, an offer to go for a walk, or some other pleasant activity. Don't hesitate to laugh together.
- **Being very sensitive to touch and to the tone and loudness of voices.** Tone of voice and body language are powerful communicators. Be aware of the effect of your non-verbal communications and make appropriate changes as necessary.
- **Be aware that if English is a second language for the person with dementia, s/he may only be conversant in his/her first language.**

## How Can My Communications Support A Caregiver?

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Whether you are a healthcare provider, family member or friend, it is important to be aware that a diagnosis of dementia is a life-changing and profound loss for everyone it touches. Family members and other loved ones will move through stages of grief toward acceptance. Not everyone copes with loss in the same way, or in the same time frame but, generally, people will pass through some or all of the following stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. It's important for friends and others to know the various ways these stages manifest and supportive responses. Caring for a loved one or family member with dementia is difficult, exhausting and often frustrating. Supportive people in a caregiver's life will be aware of the physical and emotional work involved and make room for the caregiver's fears, concerns and needs.

- **When offering help, be specific.** For some, just trying to figure out how someone can help feels like a burden. Say, "Let me do some laundry for you." "I'm headed to the store, give me your shopping list and I'll pick up what you need." Plan some time for yourself this Thursday afternoon and I'll take over for a few hours."
- **Frequent connections are important.** A phone call, a text message, a card and especially a visit can alleviate the isolation a caregiver can feel. Involvement in world beyond the person with dementia is crucial to caregiver's well-being and continued ability to care for their loved one.

- **Recognize signs of caregiver stress.** Be aware of changes in behavior: isolation, irritation, loss of energy, lack of pleasure in things normally enjoyed, frequent tears or other signs of distress. Even though it may feel strange or uncomfortable to you, be direct in communicating what you observe and be clear about strategies to help. Give the caregiver specific options for what might help and follow-up. Find support groups in your area and accompany the caregiver to a meeting.
- **Be open to and accepting of thoughts or feelings the caregiver expresses.** Sometimes the best support is just listening and understanding the difficult feelings that arise. Caregivers can often feel resentment, guilt, anxiety and fear in relation to their role as caregiver, and simply need to vent their feelings to someone they trust.
- **Be prepared to intervene.** Sometimes it's hard for a caregiver to know when it's time to get additional help in the home, or to think about residential care for their loved one. Be prepared to share your concerns with a caregiver and to offer support during the process of exploring options.

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