

Module 8: Enhancing Communication

Purpose: To assist the person with dementia and families to maintain successful communication and to learn new techniques in order to sustain meaningful relationships.

Intended Audience: Persons with dementia and family caregivers

Introduction:

Communication is essential for every day living. We depend on communication to express our thoughts, wishes and feelings. We often take for granted the steps involved in communication:

- Formulating/thinking through a message (memory and thinking);
- Talking or communicating a message (Broca's area of the brain);
- Hearing the message (auditory);
- Interpreting/understanding the message (Wernike's part of the brain);
- Interpreting any nonverbal (body language) communication (vision and thinking).

When one of these parts of communication is impaired, adjustments are needed to make interactions more successful. For example, when someone is hard of hearing, a hearing aid may be used to improve communication. Following a stroke, a person who has difficulty formulating words (aphasia) may use a communication board. For people with dementia, adjustments will also be made over time. Ongoing communication is crucial for both the person with dementia and their family caregivers. When accommodations are made, the person with dementia will be more comfortable and the family will be much more satisfied in the caregiving role.

Changes in Communication in Dementia:

Word finding: Difficulty remembering certain words or names is one of the first challenges encountered during early stages of dementia. Word finding will become more difficult as the disease progresses. As a result, the person will have more difficulty expressing him/herself. The person may try to "talk around the word" in order to find the word, or may begin substituting other words or general terms just as "that thing" or "what-cha-ma-call-it," etc.

The person is often aware of the difficulty he is having finding words and may become very frustrated or even be less communicative than normal. It is not uncommon for families to want to help their loved one by trying to give the person "hints" or even tell them the word directly. Some individuals may willingly accept these helpful strategies, while others may become very defensive, argumentative or angry. Each person is very unique in accepting adjustments, but here are a few suggestions.

"Try This" Strategies:

- Always begin communication by eliminating any possible background distractions such as the TV, too many people talking at once, etc.
- Make sure glasses, hearing aids and dentures are all correctly prescribed and well-fitting.
- Allow ample time for the person to communicate his message. Try not to finish his sentences.
- If you are able to, remain still and with the person while you are talking to him. This will make it easier for him to follow you and show him that you are trying to understand him.
- When he has difficulty finding a word, consider asking him to explain in a different way. You may also try to guess the meaning and ask if you are correct.
- If he can't think of the right word, try giving clues instead of immediately supplying it, e.g. 'cup of ...'. You can also try giving a description, e.g., 'You clean your teeth with it'.
- Ask him to show you what he is referring to. Pointing to an object may also help him get the message across.
- Maintain your sense of humor so that you are able to diffuse tense and frustrating moments.

Receptive Language: The person with dementia will also have difficulty understanding what is being said to him over time. Caregivers may not recognize this as a change, rather may think their loved one is either ignoring or disregarding them. When receptive language (understanding) becomes impaired, the person may appear “spaced out” or “blank” or may simply ignore the person speaking to them. Remember, this is probably not the case. He is most likely having a bad day understanding language!

It has been estimated that up to 90% of communication takes place through nonverbal communication such as using gestures, facial expressions, touch and even voice tone! While the meaning of words may be challenged or lost, the intent of what is being communicated may be very clear. Nonverbal messages will often be well received. For example, the person with dementia may be very aware that you are frustrated or angry by the tone of your voice when communicating. Likewise, a gentle touch may more effectively communicate your love and concern. On days that receptive language is particularly challenged, you will need to employ some additional strategies.

“Try This” Strategies:

- Remain calm and talk in a gentle, matter-of-fact way without raising your voice.
- Keep sentences short and simple, focusing on one idea at a time. Talk about familiar events that may be remembered or everyday things like weather.

- Avoid “talking down” to him or using childlike voice tones. The conversation should remain adult-like.
- Avoid complex or long conversations.
- Try using different words as you repeat what you are asking or communicating.
- Try more “yes” and “no” questions.
- Allow plenty of time for him to interpret what you have said.
- Touching and holding his hand may help keep his attention as well as showing him that you care.
- Gently leading/cueing him through the (verbal) request may be helpful. For example, extend your hand and say, “come with me,” “put your arm in this sleeve,” etc.
- Simplify tasks as he becomes more confused. Give only one direction at a time and stick with the most familiar task.
- Showing and touching physical objects and/or pictures may help with memory and assist with conversation.
- Music can be an excellent way of communicating as it can help a person recall words and express feelings. Play some favorite music for about 30 minutes.
- Utilize old photos or picture books in order to stimulate memories and brief conversation. Use the pictures as a tool for discussion rather than a question and answer session.

Worsening memory: Continued loss of both short-term and long-term memory will further impact the person’s ability to communicate over time. Even during short sentences, the person may forget what he/she was about to say. Favorite stories told repeatedly by the person may become more challenging. The words that are used to put together a sentence or story may become merged with other thoughts and result in random conversation. When concentration is affected, his mind may easily wander off the conversation. Sentences may be shorter and even scrambled. Nonsense words may be added into conversation. This is sometimes called “word salad” and may not make sense to the caregiver but probably has meaning to the person.

It is important to keep communicating even though it will be most difficult for the caregiver. One way conversations will become more common. Using all of senses will also help in maintaining those special connections. For example, taking a walk outdoors while holding hands, listening to the birds, and smelling the fresh air may communicate many messages such as, “I love you,” “It’s so good to spend time with you,” “The world is such a beautiful place,” etc. It may even lead to spontaneous and renewed opportunities of communication for your loved one. Listed below are some strategies that may help as formulating thoughts and words become more limited.

“Try This” Strategies:

- Rely more heavily on non-verbal cues such as the tone of voice, touch, and facial expressions to convey how you feel.
- Keep modifying your expectations at each stage so that you remain realistic. However, keep trying new ways to connect or ask others for help. Friends and other family members share unique relationships with the person and may find a new way to connect that you too can use.
- Listen for and learn to recognize the feelings and emotions rather than the words.
- Continue sharing favorite and familiar activities and pastimes with the person. This might include listening to favorite music, watching a favorite movie or old comedy show, looking at a picture book, or enjoying a favorite sweet treat.
- People still retain their feelings and emotions even though they may not understand what is being said, so do everything you can to preserve their dignity and self-esteem.
- Never discuss the person in front of others as if they were not present, even if you think they do not understand.

When the going gets rough: Being “on call” 24/7 can wear the caregiver down. The fatigue and frustration of daily care can lead to more abrupt communication and nonverbal cues. (This is one of many reasons to get a much needed and planned break throughout the week!) When you feel yourself getting frustrated or impatient, it is time for a quick break so that you can compose yourself to get through the day. Try not to be too hard on yourself. Remember that structure and routine is very important to the person with dementia and will provide more predictability and sense of security. Here are some final general tips to keep in mind.

“Try This” Strategies:

- Avoid upsetting arguments or allowing your own stress and exasperation to show. There is an expression, “no one ever wins an argument with a person with dementia!”
- Use distraction when possible to help overcome upsets and frustration – focus on quick pleasant things such as a favorite conversation, photo or food (e.g. Hershey’s kiss).
- Incorporating information in your conversation which tells him where he is, what is happening around him and who he is with, can make him feel more secure and less confused.
- Use orienting names whenever you can such as 'your son, Jack'.
- When talking in a group, make sure he is not on the end of the row. It is better to place him so that the conversation is around him and he will not feel 'left out'.

- Exercise forgiveness. You will make mistakes and so will he. But, he will forget and you won't. Find a confidant who will allow you to openly share your feelings. Or, consider joining a support group.
- Self expression is vital to well being. Your efforts in assisting and adapting to your loved one's communication abilities will make a difference!