

Communication Tips for Caregivers

Communication is important at any age and at any stage of Alzheimer's disease. People can benefit from loving gestures and touch long after they lose their ability to communicate with words.

Communication Impairment in Alzheimer's Disease:

Alzheimer's disease damages parts of the brain important for expressing oneself, and also for processing what others are saying. Called aphasia, this impairment tends to get worse as the disease progresses.

Communication in Early Stage Alzheimer's:

- ♦ Be sensitive.
- ♦ Treat the individual as an adult.
- ♦ Allow time for the person to process and respond.
- ♦ Do not downplay the disease.
- ♦ Have patience for repeated questions.
- ♦ Prepare simple answers to the person's questions.
- ♦ Offer reassurance and express your desire to provide ongoing support.
- ♦ Offer suggestions instead of asking questions.
- ♦ Use short statements; avoid multi-clause sentences.

Communication in Middle Stage Alzheimer's:

- ♦ Use simple language.
- ♦ Don't argue or try to use logic.
- ♦ Allow the person to express his or her feelings. Avoid telling them they shouldn't feel that way.
- ♦ Decrease background noise and other distractions.
- ♦ Approach from the front.
- ♦ Encourage the person to use gestures to communicate — "point to what you want."

Communication in Late Stage Alzheimer's:

- ♦ Use favorite music from the era of the person with dementia.
- ♦ Read or sing to them.
- ♦ Reminisce - old memories sometimes remain even after recent memories fade.
- ♦ Touch continues to be important. A loving voice and gentle touch are often soothing.
- ♦ Smile.
- ♦ Avoid loud noises and fast movement.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

As the person with Alzheimer's disease loses the ability to express and understand language, non-verbal communication becomes more important. A loving and gentle tone of voice communicates reassurance and safety, even when the words are not understood. Steady eye contact communicates respect and concern. A head nod, or a soft touch on the hand lets the person with Alzheimer's disease know you care.

Alzheimer's New Jersey®

Behavior is Communication:

All behavior has meaning. Even if the person is not intentionally communicating, caregivers can pick up on unmet needs or feelings by “tuning in” to their loved ones behavior changes.

The person with Alzheimer’s disease who is agitated and pacing may be communicating that they need to use a bathroom, are in pain, or are confused. Check to see that basic needs are met, and reassure and comfort the person who is agitated.

Behavior changes can also be caused by reactions to:

- ♦ an unfamiliar or changing environment.
- ♦ hallucinations or delusions.
- ♦ others’ stress or anxiety.

Often, gentle reassurance and other communication tips will help calm the person. If the person is still very agitated, or if there is a sudden change in the person’s behavior, consult the physician, as there may be an underlying infection or other issue that requires medical assistance.

Tips for Enhancing Interactions:

- ♦ Speak in a calm and reassuring tone.
- ♦ Talk slowly and distinctly.
- ♦ Use simple words.
- ♦ Approach the individual from the front to avoid startling them.
- ♦ Address the person by name.
- ♦ Maintain eye contact while speaking.
- ♦ Use positive reinforcements, such as smiles and a gentle touch.
- ♦ Allow an adequate period for a response when engaging in conversation.
- ♦ Ask only one question at a time.
- ♦ Eliminate distractions.
- ♦ Avoid negative-sounding statements. Instead of “Don’t go outside,” say “Let’s stay inside.”
- ♦ Use humor whenever possible, though not at the individual’s expense.
- ♦ Use non-verbal gestures for cueing, such as demonstrating handwashing.

Support groups can be an excellent way to learn tips from other caregivers on how to cope with communication challenges and behavior concerns. Most of all, support groups provide an opportunity to connect with people who know what you’re going through. Alzheimer’s New Jersey has a number of support groups throughout the region on different times and days to accommodate family caregivers.

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