



Communication

Understanding changes in behaviour



Alzheimer National Helpline

1800 341 341

About this factsheet

Communicating is vital to our sense of identity and our quality of life. This factsheet provides tips to help communicate with a person with dementia and strategies to support a person with dementia to express themselves.

Communication and dementia

While every person with dementia will experience changes and challenges in how they use and understand language, each person's experience is unique. For many people with dementia, language skills can vary from day-to-day. The difficulties a person may experience with communication can depend on;

- the type or cause of their dementia
- how long they have had dementia
- if they are experiencing discomfort or pain
- if they have another illness or infection
- side effects of medication

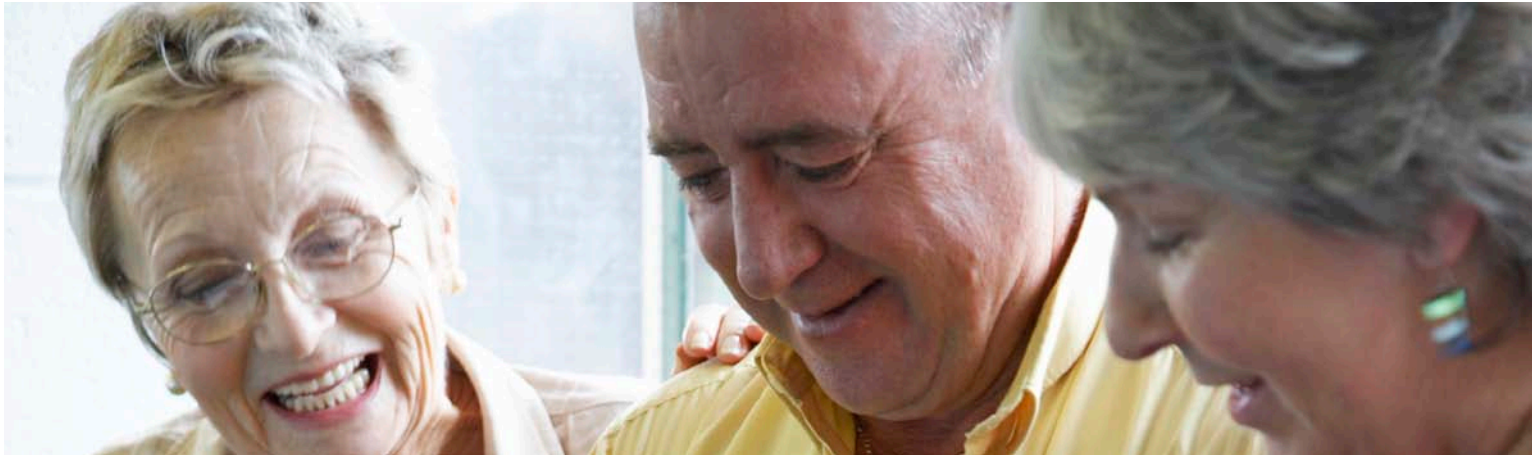
Communicating with a person with dementia

Changes in how a person communicates can be upsetting and frustrating for everyone. The following are some tips and strategies that may help when you are trying to communicate and may help you to encourage and support a person with dementia to express themselves.

Prepare

- Try to ensure you are relaxed. Take a few minutes to clear your head before you begin, especially if you feel stressed or rushed
- Think through what you are going to say before you start, have a clear idea of what you want to achieve
- Allow time to communicate what you need to say
- Reduce background noise and distractions such as TV or radio or other people's conversations

If you feel there has been a sudden change in how a person communicates, it is a good idea to check with the doctor to see if there is undiagnosed pain, discomfort or illness.



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Gaining attention

- Try to make eye contact
- Make sure the person can see and hear you. This may involve checking glasses and hearing aids
- Move to the same level as the person - for example sit if they are sitting
- Using someone's name when talking to them may keep their attention and help them to retain a sense of identity
- As dementia progresses, some people may struggle to recognise even close family and friends. You may need to be clear about who you are. If you are visiting or introducing a visitor, say the name and even the relationship, particularly if the person is new or a professional

Speaking

- Speak slowly, clearly and calmly
- Use simple short sentences
- Pause between each topic
- Include the person in decision making and offer choice where possible. However, if you think this may cause confusion and frustration, it may help to use questions which only require 'yes' and 'no' answers and avoid complicated decision making
- Ask questions one at a time

- Be mindful that your tone matches what you are saying
- Avoid shouting or using a sharp tone as this can cause distress
- Avoid slang or abbreviations unless you know they are familiar terms
- If the person doesn't understand, try a different way to say the same thing or use objects or pictures for reference

Listening

- Listen carefully and allow plenty of time for the person to respond to you
- Tell the person what you have understood and check with them that you are right
- If the person is having difficulty finding a word or finishing a sentence, ask them to explain in a different way and focus on a word or phrase that makes sense
- If their speech has become hard to understand, use what you know about them and what you feel they might be trying to say to help you interpret. Always try to check back with them and reaffirm this is what they meant
- The person may express disapproval in alternative ways such as their shaking their head, turning away or murmuring. It is important to listen to and acknowledge this message.



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Body language and physical contact

- Be aware not to invade a person's personal space. Don't stand too close or stand over a person, move to their eye level so they feel more comfortable
- Make sure your body language and expression match what you are saying
- If you are tense, hurried or annoyed the person with dementia is likely to pick up on this and may find it harder to communicate
- Be aware of the person's own body movements and expressions, they often provide clues as to how they are feeling or what they are trying to communicate

Other ways of communicating

- Use body movements such as pointing or demonstrating an action to assist the person to understand what you are saying. Be mindful, this should be done tactfully to ensure the person feels respected at all times
- Humour can bring you closer, can release tension, and is good therapy. Laughing together over mistakes or misunderstandings can help
- Communication can be supported by labelling items, using photographs, a memory board, keeping a diary, a clock, and signage in significant places
- Reminiscence, creating a life story book and a memory box can be great ways to encourage and support communication. See our Activities factsheet for more information

Showing respect

- Even if a person with dementia is unable to speak, that does not mean they cannot understand what is being said to them or about them. You may need to remind people of this.
- In an effort to be understood, some people talk to people with dementia with childish words or talk down to them, you can encourage others not to do this and lead by example

Other difficulties

- Pain, discomfort, infection, illness or the side-effects of medication can increase the person's confusion and make communication more difficult. Contact the GP if you suspect such a situation

Fact and fantasy can become confused as dementia progresses. If a person says something that you know to be incorrect, consider the impact and value of correcting them. Sometimes it is better to move the conversation around the subject. At other times, we need to live in their moment and join them in their sense of reality. Try to avoid disagreeing with the person, instead try to acknowledge and validate their feelings.

