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Dementia Care Specialists

# 10 Communication Tips for **Dementia Caregivers**

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## Introduction

**Communication—the expressive or receptive exchange of information—is vital to the functional success and emotional well-being of a person with dementia.**

Yet difficulty expressing needs and/or understanding another person is common when someone has Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia. And communication breakdowns can be extremely stressful for both the person with dementia and the caregiver. They can also contribute significantly to excess disability.

But you have the power to communicate effectively with someone who has dementia—throughout every stage of their disease—by adapting your communication style.

### **Expressive communication**

involves expressing one's needs and thoughts through speech, body language, facial expressions, etc.

### **Receptive communication**

involves understanding the communications of others, through their speech, body language, facial expressions, etc.



## Adapting your communication style

Never underestimate the powerful impact you have on someone you provide care for. As a care partner, you are the most important tool for facilitating a positive experience—for the person and for you.

When it comes to communicating with someone who has dementia, ask yourself:

“How can I adapt to this person, instead of them adapting to me?”

Use the tips on the following pages to adapt your communication style, and you’ll help improve the person’s function, emotional well-being, and quality of life.

**> A person-centered approach that’s grounded in dignity and respect is a key to communicating effectively with a person who has dementia.**

### Tip 1: Gain attention and trust.

Before you speak, make sure you have gained the person's attention.

It's also important that the person in your care feels safe with you and that you have their agreement and approval to proceed.

#### EXAMPLES

"Ed, is your daughter coming to see you today?"

"Good morning, Betty. It's time to go to breakfast."

"Les, would you like to take a walk?"

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### Tip 2: Approach from the front.

Always try to approach a person with dementia from the front so they have an opportunity to recognize you. Keep in mind too that in the later stages of dementia, the person's range of vision may become more limited, so you may need to make further adaptations.

Before speaking, make direct eye contact (unless it's culturally unacceptable) and stand or sit in front of the person so that you're at their eye level. Maintaining eye contact during the conversation helps show that you're listening. It also builds trust, promotes respect, and lets the person know that you care about them.



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### Tip 3: Minimize distractions.

People who live with dementia are often easily distracted by both sights and sounds.

Before communicating, try to eliminate all unnecessary sources of stimulation.

If you need to handle someone's personal belongings, be sure to ask their permission first.

#### EXAMPLES

"Frances, can I take your sweater to the laundry?"

"Mr. Ferris, can you turn the volume down on your radio?"

"Helen, let's put these magazines away until after lunch."

#### Tip 4: Lead with the person's name.

Calling a person with dementia by their name shows respect, and identifying yourself often helps the person with orientation.

Leading with the person's name will also catch their attention, improving their ability to attend to your question or request.

#### EXAMPLES

"Hi Mrs. Turner, I'm Carrie. Are you ready to play cards?"

"Good morning, Ethel. You have a visitor coming today, don't you?"

"George, it's Becky. How are you feeling today?"

#### Tip 5: Avoid pronouns.

Referring to a book as "it" or to a person's son as "he" can seem logical to someone who does not have a cognitive disability. But for someone who has dementia, pronouns can often frustrate and confuse. What is "it," and who is "he"?

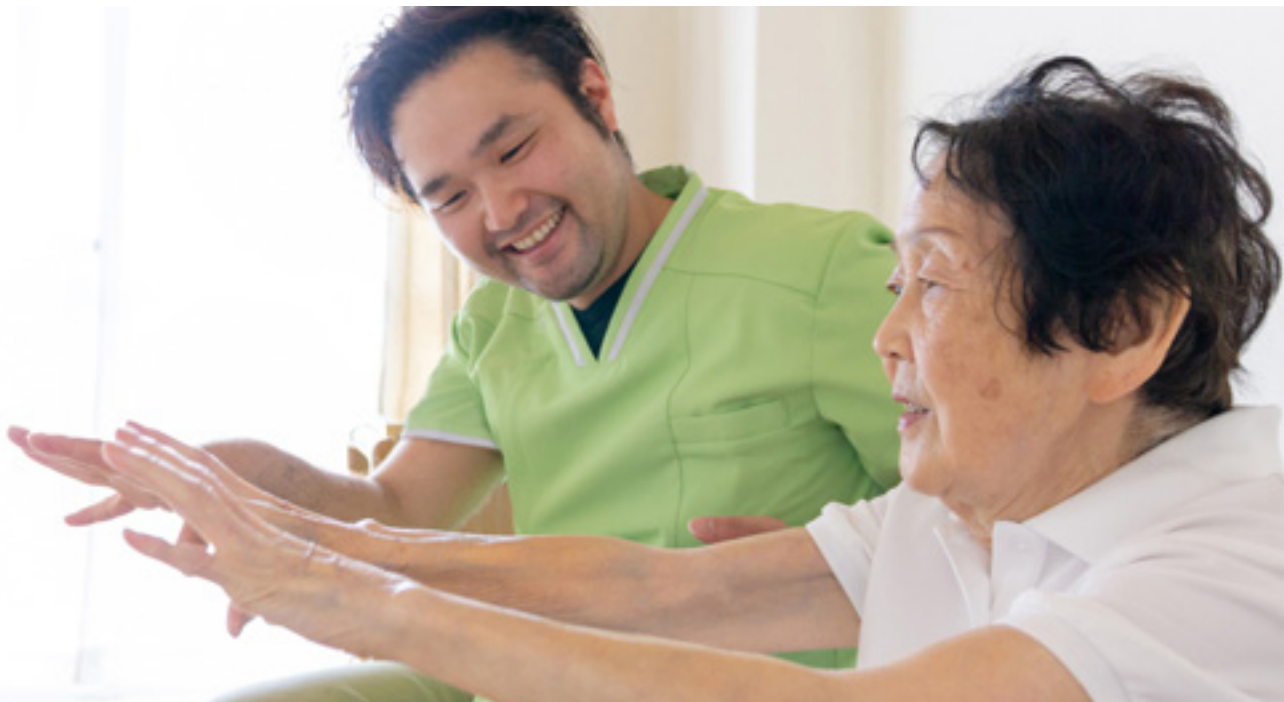
To be clear, speak clearly. Use simple sentences, and avoid words like it, he, his, she, her, them, they, those, etc. as much as possible.

#### EXAMPLES

"Marvin, when did Arlene leave?" (not "she")

"Caroline, can you put your shirt in the basket?" (not "it")

"Tony, let's give the books back to Jerry and Allen." (not "them")



### Tip 6: Use short sentences.

Long sentences filled with lots of information can be confusing to someone with dementia. A sentence like “Turn the water on and wash your face because your daughter is coming to see you this afternoon and we want you to be freshened up before her visit” will most likely not be fully understood.

Keep your sentences short and to the point.

### EXAMPLES

“Bob, your son will be here soon.”

“Mr. Gibson, turn on the water.”

“Barbara, use the towel.”

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### Tip 7: Wait for a response.

Research shows that response time for a person with dementia can be delayed by up to 30 seconds.

For you as a caregiver, this delay might be frustrating sometimes. It’s also easy to misinterpret a delay as the person’s inability to comprehend your message.

When communicating with someone who has dementia, allow time for them to process your words. During processing, do not distract the person. Be patient and you will often receive the response you might otherwise have missed.



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### Tip 8: Use visual or tactile cues.

Words alone may not be enough to convey the meaning of your message. This can lead to a lack of response and the conclusion that the person cannot or will not do what you’re asking.

Use visual demonstrations and tactile/hands-on cues to illustrate your words.

### EXAMPLES

While saying “Please brush your hair,” demonstrate the movement of hair brushing.

While saying “Raise your arm,” raise your arm to demonstrate.

While saying “It’s time to eat,” put your hand to your mouth to simulate eating.



### Tip 9: Watch your messages.

A key aspect of communication is nonverbal. In addition to the words you use, your tone of voice, volume, body language, and facial expressions also send a message every time you speak.

Nonverbal messages can be both intentional and unintentional, so be careful not to change the meaning of your message with your nonverbal cues.

#### EXAMPLES

Keep your volume at a normal level (unless the person is hard of hearing).

Avoid crossing your arms, as this can indicate impatience or tension.

Remember that a smile is often contagious.

### Tip 10: Be patient, supportive, and friendly.

At every stage of dementia, there is a person behind the patient.

When it comes to how someone with dementia communicates, let them know that they have your full attention. Focus on the feelings related to their communication, not just the facts.

Whenever possible and appropriate, use additional forms of communication to express support, such as touches and smiles.

Remember that good communication brings rewards to both the sender and the receiver.

