

Strategies for communication

Each person's experience of dementia will be different. The many influencing factors include the type and stage of the dementia, the person's social circumstances, environment, life history and personality. Consequently the following are only general strategies which may be helpful.

General considerations

- Be aware that the person may have problems with hearing or vision; do they need glasses or a hearing aid?
- Cut down distractions e.g. turn off the radio or TV, turn off mobile phone notifications
- Be aware of background noise Sometimes public places can be unsettling, with other people chatting and background noise
- Provide opportunities for communication
- Be responsive to any attempts at communication
- Try to ensure an enjoyable and positive interaction rather than focusing too much on accurate use of words or information
- Avoid "talking down" to a person or talking about them to other people in their presence. Instead, include the person in your conversation
- If you cannot understand what someone is trying to say, look for the message behind their words. It can help to repeat back what you think they mean
- Respond to the feelings/emotions behind the message and reinforce with positive and reassuring non-verbal communication
- Try to be with the person as they are in this moment rather than how they used to be

To help the person with dementia understand you

- Gain the person's attention before speaking by stopping what you are doing, by saying his/her name and/or if appropriate touching their arm
- Face the person so that he/she can see you clearly and read your non-verbal communication
- Move closer if necessary
- Make sure that you are at the same physical level as the person
- Establish and maintain good eye contact
- Make sure the lighting is good and that it is on your face
- Speak a little more slowly but keep the natural intonation pattern

- Speak clearly and calmly
- Use short simple sentences and stress the key words that provide the most information
- Be aware of your non-verbal communication and tone of voice
- Ensure that your body language is relaxed, friendly and non-threatening
- Use gesture and pointing when necessary to aid understanding
- Pause briefly between phrases to give the person time to process
- Give the person any information they might need, eg “It is dinner time” or “We are going to the shops”. Only give one piece of information at a time, to avoid overloading the person.
- Match verbal and non-verbal aspects of the message. Try to associate words and actions as much as possible in daily care.
- Avoid changing the topic of conversation too often or too quickly as this may be confusing for the person
- Repeat a question or statement if necessary, gently and clearly. It may help to paraphrase it.

To help you understand the person with dementia

- Find out as much as you can about the person. The more you know the easier it will be to interpret what the person is trying to say
- Be aware of the person’s total communication style, both verbal and non-verbal.
- Be aware of the context of conversation
- Don’t take each word too literally. Try to get the gist of what the person is trying to tell you.
- Observe and listen carefully. Look for any underlying meaning/message
- If a person loses track, be ready to gently prompt with what has been said so far
- Check your understanding as you go along, it is often possible to make guesses about what someone might mean by the person’s reaction, indicating whether you are right or wrong. If you are wrong, try again.
- Respond to the feelings/emotion behind the message and reinforce with positive and reassuring non-verbal communication
- Avoid interrupting or correcting the person if what they are saying is not strictly accurate. The main focus should be on creating a positive and enjoyable experience.

Remember

- While it's important to allow the person to lead the conversation if they wish, the "burden" of communication must be on you
- The more you know about someone, the easier it is to read their body language and interpret the symbolic meaning behind their speech.
- Some examples of symbolic meaning:
 - A person who is looking for their mother may be expressing a need for comfort, reassurance, safety or security
 - Anxieties about children may be an expression of a need for identity as a caring nurturing individual
 - A person who is constantly busy throughout the day might be expressing the need for occupation and stimulation.
 - A person who is looking for lost objects may be expressing the need for attachment
- It is important to validate the person's feelings whenever possible and not get into disagreements about facts.
- Behaviours that are seen as 'challenging' are very often attempts to communicate something. Rather than judging the person's actions, explore what the thoughts and feelings might be behind the behaviour
- Whenever possible, maintain a running commentary in order to keep the person informed about what is happening
- Slow down to the pace of the person with dementia, even if you are in a hurry, otherwise the person may become anxious or frustrated

Someone who is quiet and undemanding may easily become isolated as dementia progresses. Regular short interactions, such as stopping to say hello, saying the person's name and/or holding their hand for a moment or two, will help the person to stay connected to the world around them and enhance their wellbeing.

Produced by Engaging Dementia

Registered Charity No. 20033439, Revenue CHY 11938

www.engagingdementia.ie

