

HOW TO INTERACT WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS DEMENTIA

Family members and caregivers oftentimes have a very difficult time communicating with someone with dementia. Many times, miscommunication actually creates negative behaviors. It is important to remember that the person with dementia is not being deliberately difficult. They can be reacting to stress or a frustrated attempt to communicate with you. If you are not connected and know the importance of properly communicating, frustration will be apparent in you as a caregiver and in them. It is our job to provide comfort and to learn how to connect with each person we meet who has dementia, no matter what kind.

Dementia robs the person of speech, dignity and so much more and this list just seems to continue to grow if we do not know how to communicate and connect. We must always remember to step into their world of dementia as trying to pull them into our reality will only create mistrust and potential behaviors. One common mistake is when the resident continues to ask for their mother. When we tell them that their mother is dead, we have just made that person upset, angry, depressed and mistrusting. However, if we step into the dementia world and say, "Your mother called, and she will be here at 6:00 this evening," this proves to cause less stress and makes them more comfortable. I have had many people tell me that they could not possibly "lie" to the person. My response to that is that "This is not about you, but about the resident". When that response is finally absorbed, staff and even family members become more connected and at ease. Now, this question could be asked twenty times a day, but when they receive the same answer, the resident can move on and have a better day, participating in activities and interacting with others.

Some valid tips in communication are as follows:

- Create a calm environment. The tone of your voice and your facial expression are very important. Try not to over-react to a situation. Take things slowly and smile whenever possible. However, if they are upset, show care and concern.
- Always assume they can understand what we are saying. Never talk about the person as though he/she is not present. If you do, a behavior could occur and then you have more issues to deal with.
- Avoid quizzing the person on names and dates. Not knowing the answer can be very embarrassing for them. Often when we give a cue, the

confused person can answer. This quizzing can also increase distrust and the belief that you are “testing” them.

- Draw their attention by providing a gentle, reassuring touch on an arm or shoulder, or by holding hands. When you provide touch, you demonstrate security, a caring nature and your compassion.
- Get down on their level – sitting next to, bending down, etc., so that you are not hovering over them.
- Appeal to their sense of humor – never laugh “at” them.
- Be reassuring but never be condescending.
- Do not argue or correct
- Praise their actions and do not patronize.
- Do not speak for them. So often, this occurs due to time constraints or with family present. However, if we always speak for them, they will cease speaking altogether. Give adequate time to respond.
- Do not do everything for them. If they lose the ability to do things for themselves, assist as needed but do not do completely. For example, if they can no longer dress themselves, let them point to the clothes they want to wear. I do not recommend showing an entire closet, but perhaps two articles of clothing that they can even point to. This offers them choices and the feeling of some control over their lives.
- Tell the resident it is time for their shower instead of asking if they want to take one. Many times, you will get a negative answer if you ask. Be sure to have everything ready for the shower or bath though ahead of time.
- Do not treat them like children or that they are stupid. They are none of these things so giving them respect is key to a successful connection.
- If they are angry, do not respond with anger. Be calm and try to get them involved in something they enjoy, i.e., music, a change of environment, a snack.
- Listen to them as they still have something to say even if you cannot understand them. As dementia progresses, speech becomes more and more difficult to understand.
- Lower the pitch of your voice. Do not shout but deepen your voice as it appears easier for them to understand.
- Make eye contact making for better communication.
- Slow down. Do not talk too fast and do not rush them. This in itself will create a behavior.

- Look at the resident's body language and imagine what he/she might be feeling or trying to express.
- Are the residents' needs being met? Are they hungry, thirsty, tired or in pain? Be aware!

Oftentimes, we expect too much from those afflicted with dementia. In all actuality, we are the ones creating many of their frustrations and behaviors.

If we learn to step into the world of dementia and remember that our residents only live "in the moment", quality of life and care will increase for them every day. Those days of frustration for you as a caregiver will be minimal.

Remember, communicate, and connect!

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