PALPRAC
The Association of Palliative Care Practitioners SA
215-486 NPO
930068846 PBO
info@palprac.org
www.palprac.org

COMMUNICATING WITH SOMEONE WITH DEMENTIA

General advice

- Listen carefully to what the person has to say.
- Make sure you have their full attention before you speak.
- Pay attention to body language.
- Speak clearly.
- Think about how things appear in the reality of the person with dementia.
- Consider whether any other factors are affecting communication.
- Use physical contact to reassure the person.
- Show respect and patience, remember it may take longer for the brain to process the information and respond.

Listening skills

- Try to listen carefully to what the person is saying and give encouragement.
- If the person has difficulty finding the right word or finishing a sentence, ask them to explain in a different way. listen out for clues
- If you find the speech hard to understand, use what you know about the person to interpret what they might be trying to say. But always check back to see if you are right.
- If the person is feeling sad, let them express their feelings without trying to 'jolly them along'.

Attracting the person's attention

- Try to catch and hold the attention of the person before you start to communicate
- Make sure they can see you clearly.
- Make eye contact. This will help them focus on you
- Try to minimise competing noises, such as the radio, TV or other people's conversation

Using body language

- A person with dementia will read your body language. Agitated movements or a tense facial expression may cause upset.
- Be calm and still while you communicate. This shows the person that you are giving them your full attention.
- Never stand over someone to communicate; it can feel intimidating. Instead, drop below their eye level
- Standing too close to the person can also feel intimidating, so always respect their personal space.

Speaking clearly

- The person may become less able to start a conversation, so you may have to take the initiative.
- Speak clearly and calmly. Avoid speaking sharply or raising your voice.
- Use simple, short sentences.
- Processing information will take the person longer than it used to, so allow enough time

PALPRAC
The Association of Palliative Care Practitioners SA
215-486 NPO
930068846 PBO
info@palprac.org
www.palprac.org

COMMUNICATING WITH SOMEONE WITH DEMENTIA

- Avoid asking direct questions. People with dementia can become frustrated if they can't find the answer, and they may respond with irritation or even aggression
- If you have to, ask questions one at a time and phrase to allow for a 'yes' or 'no' answer.
- Try not to ask the person to make complicated decisions. Too many choices can be confusing and frustrating
- Humour can help to bring you closer together, and is a great pressure valve. Try to laugh together about misunderstandings- it can help.

Whose reality?

- As dementia progresses, fact and fantasy can become confused. If the person says something you know isn't true, try to find ways around the situation rather than a flat contradiction.
- If the person says "We must leave now- Mother is waiting", you may reply, 'Your mother use to wait for you, didn't she?'
- Always avoid making the person with the dementia feel foolish in front of other people

Physical contact

- Even when conversation becomes more difficult, being warm or affectionate can help carers to remain close to their loved ones, or for the person with dementia to feel supported.
- Communicate your care and affection by the tone of your voice and the touch of your hand.
- Don't underestimate the reassurance you can give by holding or patting the person's hand or putting your arm around them, if it feels right.

Show respect

- Make sure no one speaks down to the person with dementia or treats them like a child. No one likes being patronised.
- Try to include the person in conversations with others. You may find it easier if you adapt the way you say things slightly. Being included in the social groups can help a person with dementia to preserve their fragile sense of their own identity.
- If you are getting little response from the person, it can be very tempting to speak about the person as if they weren't there. But disregarding someone in this way can make them feel very cut off, frustrated and sad.

Other causes of communication difficulty

It is important to bear in mind that communication can be affected by other factors in addition to dementia- for example

- pain, discomfort, illness or the side-effects of medication. If you suspect this might be happening, talk to your healthcare provider.
- problems with sight, hearing or ill-fitting dentures. Make sure the person's glasses are the correct prescription, that their hearing aids ore working properly, and that their dentures fit well and are comfortable.

Scan for more resources