

Top 10 Communication Tips

It is important for caregivers to pay close attention to how they communicate with a loved one who is suffering from dementia. Utilizing reason or logic with someone who is cognitively impaired may no longer be an effective way of resolving issues. Although you cannot change the person you are caring for, you can change how you respond to them, and trying a different approach may produce a more desirable response.

The following tips suggest a helpful way to communicate when reasoning with your loved one does not work:

1. Never argue, instead agree

Your loved one's mother may have died many years ago but the patient's mind does not dwell in the present, so they may truly believe that their mother is still living. Place yourself in the patient's reality. Try to enter their version of reality by agreeing with and supporting their beliefs. Insisting that "your Mother died twenty years ago!" creates a renewed sense of loss, grief and confusion.

2. Never reason, instead divert

People suffering from dementia often express the need to "go home now" because they no longer recognize where they live as "home." Try to divert your loved one's attention by involving them in a conversation or an activity they enjoy. Saying something like "You can't go home – you live here now" can trigger fear and a sense of helplessness, which will result in difficult behavior issues.

3. Never shame, instead distract

If your loved one acts out in a way that is inappropriate or embarrassing, just remember that they no longer have the social "filters" in place that help us remember what behaviors are acceptable. Try to distract them by drawing their attention elsewhere.

4. Never lecture, instead reassure

A smile, a gentle touch and soft words of support are comforting to someone whose world no longer makes sense.

5. Don't remind, instead reminisce

A person with short or some long term memory loss may have very good recall of the distant past. Rather than emphasize what they've forgotten, give your loved one an opportunity to talk about what they do remember. This gives them an opportunity to feel capable and successful.

Continued on Page 2

Top 10 Communication Tips, continued

Page 2

6. Never say “I just told you” — instead, repeat

A person with memory loss can forget things you told them only minutes ago. Although you may feel frustrated or angry, understand that repeating yourself will become a new necessity in communicating. Your loved one is not trying to be difficult; but they honestly do not remember the previous instructions.

7. Don't say “You can't” — instead, encourage

Although we are often tempted to do things for someone suffering from dementia if we think they'll experience difficulty, try to empower your loved one by allowing them to handle some tasks on their own. It may take them longer to accomplish and you may still have to assist to some degree, but all of us, regardless of our physical or mental state, need to remain active and feel like we have some control of our lives. However, if the task would not be safe for a cognitively impaired person to attempt, suggest that they do something else and you will handle this particular issue instead.

8. Never command or demand, instead ask or model

Just as we sometimes resist a person who appears demanding, those with memory issues may react exactly the same way. Soften your voice tone when asking your loved one to do something. Be polite, give them time to act and if necessary show them what you want done by using fewer verbal instructions and more modeling.

9. Never condescend, instead encourage and praise

You can never give too much positive praise and encouragement to anyone, particularly someone with dementia. Try to make kind words and gestures part of your ongoing communication with your loved one.

10. Never force, instead reinforce

Keep communication simple and your actions consistent. Be willing to reinforce and guide your loved one as much as necessary.

Caregiving is undoubtedly one of the most difficult but important jobs one will ever do. It requires patience that you may not always feel you have, unconditional love, and a great sense of humor! Make sure to take care of yourself as well as your loved one, and remember that the Alzheimer's & Dementia Resource Center is here to help you.