

# Tips for Communicating with a Person with Dementia

- Reassure, Reassure, Reassure.
- Try to remain calm.
- Do not disagree with made-up stories.
- Use compliments often.
- Respond to the person's feelings, not their words.
- Use distractions.
- Do not try to reason with the person.
- Give yourself permission to alter the truth or tell a "therapeutic fib".
- Avoid asking questions that rely on short-term memory.
- Break down all tasks into simple steps.
- Respond calmly to anger. Don't contradict.

## ● **Reassure, Reassure, Reassure**

Consider how you might reassure the person that they are not alone, that you are with them, and that you will keep them safe. Use good eye contact and touch when delivering messages of reassurance. Just saying, "You're OK" might not be enough.

## ● **Try to remain calm**

The person with dementia tends to mimic our emotions. When we become angry or upset, we might see the same emotions displayed by the care receiver. It is the caregiver's challenge to remind yourself that the person is not saying or doing things to purposefully annoy or upset you. It helps to try to remember that the person with dementia is doing the best she can.

## ● **Do not disagree with made-up stories**

Trying to orient the person to "reality" usually causes an argument, or the person with dementia withdraws, feels inadequate, and stops talking. Accepting the reality of the person with dementia is accepting the person they have become. Remember, we cannot change the way the person with dementia thinks. But we can change the way we think and respond to this person. After all, it's not the content of the conversation that's important, it's the feelings shared.

## ● **Use compliments often**

Typically, the person with dementia is experiencing feelings of low self-worth. By complimenting the person often, for how they look, their participation in a conversation, or a small contribution they might make, we are recognizing and acknowledging their

selfworth. When we compliment a person with dementia, they will more than likely feel more comfortable in your presence and feel a closer “connection” to you.

- **Respond to the person’s feelings, not their words**

When a person tells you stories that are not based on fact, for example, believing that their parents are still alive, believing you are their mother instead of their wife, or saying they want to go home when they are already in their home, it is best not to disagree with the person or correct her. Instead, pay more attention to what they are feeling, not their words. The person is probably feeling alone, or scared and needs to feel the comfort they once felt with their mother and father. It is common for the person to remember their childhood home and feel a longing for that home. Try talking to them about their past, some of the good times that he or she can remember. Reminisce about how it used to be with their parents. Simultaneously, allow the person to feel comforted by you – offer physical touch and eye contact. Remind them with your kind gestures that they are not alone.

- **Use Distractions**

You distract a person by changing the subject, the environment or the people involved. Before you distract, it is important to “connect” with the person on a feeling level. For example, if Martha was anxious about not finding her purse, you might say, “I can see you are concerned about your purse. Let me help you look for your purse.” Then, you can distract her by possibly bringing her into another room and asking her if she would like some ice cream. Two excellent distractions are food and asking for their help.

- **Do not try to reason with the person**

Remember, one of the losses that occurs with dementia is the ability to reason. This cannot be restored. This might be one of the most difficult tips to remember! Because we are reasonable people, we tend to want to reason and to use logic. We do not want to admit that the person can no longer understand us.

- **Give yourself permission to alter the truth or tell a “therapeutic fib”**

Not all caregivers are comfortable “altering the truth.” However, by using this technique, you can often spare the person with dementia’s feelings of self-worth and help them remain calm. For example, if a spouse becomes very anxious when the wife tells him she is going to a support group, why not tell him that she is going to lunch with a friend?

- **Avoid asking questions that rely on short term memory**

People with dementia lose their ability to retain information that happened in the recent past. However, they do tend to recall information from the distant past (such as information about their parents and their childhood). It is important to accept that short-term memory loss is not reversible. We cannot teach or train our loved one to remember. Trying to correct them will only embarrass them, make them angry or make them sad.

- **Break down all tasks into simple steps.**

Would you ever ask your loved one to set the table for 12 guests and use the good China, the placemats...and don't forget the silverware and napkins?" Of course not, that task would be overwhelming! However, if you break the task down into small simple steps, cue the person by showing them what to do next, the task becomes less complicated. Breaking the task down into simple steps is very effective when helping the person take care of their personal needs, like brushing their teeth, or sitting on the toilet. You really can't overestimate the number of steps involved in performing even the simplest activities.

- **Respond Calmly to Anger. Don't contradict.**

When a person with dementia gets angry, try to consider how someone (possibly the caregiver) has taken control away from this person. Was the caregiver trying to be too helpful, was he/she rushing to complete a task? Physiologically, it takes approximately 20 minutes for an angry person to calm down. During this time, it is best to make sure that you and the person with dementia remain safe. It is probably not a time to have eye contact or try to soothe the person. Let the angry person have some "distance" and space. After 15-20 minutes, try distracting or redirecting the person into a comfortable activity like having a snack or taking a walk.

Remember...troubling behavior usually results from a cause; something "triggers" the behavior. If you want to prevent a behavior from occurring again and again, use good communications skills and try a different approach. It is much easier to change our own patterns and behavior than it is to change the person with dementia 😊.