

Communication Skills

*Communicating with your relative and expressing
yourself effectively*

The Importance of Effective Communication

Effective communication is the building block for all of your other caregiving skills. If done well, it can decrease arguments, reduce difficult behaviors, and increase feelings of connection. Unfortunately, communicating with someone with memory loss can be challenging because cognitive impairment:

- affects your relative's ability to understand what you say
- limits your relative's ability to express what he/she wants to say
- limits your relative's ability to remember their own thoughts from one moment to the next
- can prevent your relative from finding the right words, or finding words at all.

Your relative cannot change his/her communication problems, so it's important that we find other ways to communicate with them.



"All right, have it your way - you heard a seal bark!"

Things to consider when you are communicating with a person with memory problems:

1. How are you presenting yourself?

People with memory problems are very sensitive to non-verbal signals such as facial expressions, body tension, and mood. Are you frowning? Hunched over? Are your hands balled in a fist?

2. What is your approach?

People with memory loss tend to “*mirror*” the affect of those around them. If you’re impatient, your relative will pick up on these feelings and may feel anxious or alarmed. If you’re relaxed and gentle, they are more likely to feel calm as well. Check in with yourself, and take a break to calm down before approaching your relative, if you need to. Other tips:

- Approach your relative slowly, and from the front. Try to avoid startling them.
- Try to maintain eye contact with your relative before speaking. This will help them understand where to focus their attention.
- Try some gentle touch while speaking, like holding hands, or patting or stroking their forearm.

3. What is the environment?

People with memory problems have a harder time blocking out distractions, and competing sources of information can be overwhelming and disorienting. For example, if the television is on when you’re trying

to talk with your relative, they won't know where to focus their attention. The ideal environment to communicate with your loved one is quiet and free of distractions.

4. How's Your Timing?

You may have noticed that your relative's comprehension can fluctuate throughout the day. If you have important information to communicate, choose a time that they tend to be more alert (for most people this is morning). Also consider what else has happened that day. Did they have a big outing? A lot of socialization? If so, it might not be the best day to have a detailed conversation.

5. How much information are you providing?

People with memory problems may not remember more than a few words at a time, or may need longer to process what you say. Experiment with how fast or slow you need to speak for them to understand you, and break down complex thoughts into more manageable chunks of information.

6. What kind of information are you providing?

People with memory loss may have trouble understanding the following:

- Figures of speech and idioms – try to be as literal as possible
- Hypothetical situations (ie: “if we were to go to the park...”)
- Too many choices – if providing choices, try to narrow them down to 2

Try to avoid the following ways of communicating:

- Don't argue with your relative. You'll never "win." If you're tempted to argue, ask yourself, "to what end?" If it's hard for you to agree with your relative if they are confabulating or mis-remembering a story, try simply validating the feelings behind their statement (ie: "I can see how sad/scared/angry you are").
- Avoid explaining and rationalizing. Your relative is living in a different reality than you or I, and our rules of logic and reason do not apply to their reality.
- Don't draw attention to repeat questions (ie: "you just asked me that 5 minutes ago"). Try your best to answer the questions calmly, and the same way each time. Remember: to the person with memory loss, *this is the first time they're asking the question.*
- Avoid telling your relative too far in advance about visits, appointments, or other plans.
- Try to avoid telling your relative what they cannot do, and focus on positives. Instead of saying "you can't go for a walk alone," try "let's sit down and read the paper together."

Practice Examples:

It's 9 PM and Amy wants to start putting her husband, Joel to bed. Joel is watching the news in the living room on the highest volume possible. From the top of the stairs, Amy yells, "time for bed!" Joel doesn't move. Amy yells again, "come on Joel, I said it's time to get ready for bed!" Joel continues to stay put. Amy walks into the living room yelling "why do you insist on making everything so difficult?" and turns the TV off herself.

Rick arrives at his parents' house to take his dad, John, out to brunch. When he gets inside, John is still in his pajamas and is sitting at the table eating breakfast. "Dad," Rick says, "what are you doing? I told you a hundred times we were going out today! I put it on the calendar!" John replies, "no, you never told me anything. I would have remembered." Rick grabs the calendar and points to the entry, saying, "see? It's right here!" "Well, it wasn't there before," John replies. Rick throws his hands up and storms out of the house.

Relaxation Exercise: The Body Scan

Lie down or sit in a comfortable place (but remember that the intent is to stay alert and not to relax to the point of falling asleep). Make sure that you are warm enough – you may want to cover yourself with a blanket.

Allow your eyes to gently close.

Feel the rising and falling of your belly with each in-breath and out-breath.

Take a few moments to feel your body as a “whole”, from head to toe, the “envelope” of your skin, the sensations associated with touching the places you are in contact with on the floor, bed, or chair.

Bring your attention to the toes of your left foot. As you direct your attention to them, see if you can “direct” or channel your breathing into them at will, so that it feels as if you are breathing in *to* your toes and out *from* your toes. It may take a while for you to get the hang of this. It may help to just imagine your breath traveling down the body from your nose into the lungs and then continuing through the abdomen and down the left leg all the way to the toes and then back again and out through your nose.

Allow yourself to *feel* any and all of the sensations from your toes, perhaps distinguishing between them and watching the flux of sensations in this region. If you don’t feel anything at the moment, that is fine too. Just allow yourself to feel “not feeling anything”.

When you are ready to leave the toes and move on, take a deeper, more intentional breath in, all the way down to the toes and on the outbreath, allow them to “dissolve” in your “mind’s eye”.

Stay with your breathing for a few minutes at least, and then move on in turn to the sole of the foot, the heel, the top of the foot, and then the ankle, continuing to breathe in *to* and out *from* each region as you observe the sensations that you are experiencing, and then letting go of it and moving on.

As with awareness of the breathing exercises (signal breath and 20 breaths), bring your mind back to the breath and the region you are focusing on each time you notice that your attention has wandered off.

In this way, continue to move slowly up your left leg and through the rest of your body as you maintain focus on the breath and on the feeling of the particular regions as you come to them, breathe with them, and let go of them. If you are experiencing pain, notice the pain and adjust your body to become more comfortable, while continuing to breathe into any areas of discomfort.

If you have trouble staying awake, try doing the body scan with your eyes open.