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Communicating with Someone with Alzheimer's Disease or Related Dementia

Communicating with a person with Alzheimer's disease or related dementia can be difficult. They may have trouble understanding you as well as difficulty in expressing themselves. They may struggle with finding the words to express their thoughts, or be unable to remember the meaning of simple phrases. People with dementia may invent an entirely new word to describe a familiar object, repeat the same word or phrase over and over, or lose their train of thought completely. The following are some suggestions to help in communicating with your memory impaired loved one.

- Be calm and gentle. You set the tone for the interaction. If you are angry or tense, they will likely become angry, anxious or annoyed. Talk in a warm, easygoing manner.
- Minimize distractions, such as TV or radio, to help the person focus.
- Look at the person at eye level. If the person is sitting or in a wheelchair, squat or sit to talk with them. Use friendly facial expressions.
- Make sure you have your loved one's attention before you begin to speak. You may have to say their name several times or gently touch an arm or hand. Move slowly, and be careful not to startle them.
- Choose simple words, and speak in short sentences, slowly and clearly. The person with dementia may not be able to remember more than a few words at a time. Pause between sentences, and allow time for the information to be understood.
- Ask simple questions that require a yes or no answer, and ask only one question at a time. For example, instead of asking "what do you want to wear today?" ask, "Is this the dress you want to wear today?"
- When giving instructions, give one step at a time, and allow time for understanding before going to the next step. Such as "pick up your toothbrush." (pause) "Put toothpaste on your toothbrush."
- Allow enough time for a response, being careful not to interrupt. If the person is struggling to communicate a thought, gently try to offer the word they may be looking for.
- Don't shout at the person if they don't immediately understand you. This will only upset them and make communication more difficult. Just be patient, get the person's attention, and calmly go through the steps again.

Your relationship with your loved one with Alzheimer's disease or dementia will be different, but it can still be meaningful and rewarding. Changes are taking place in their brain. Your patience and understanding are important. The following are additional communication tips.

- If you do not understand what the person is saying, apologize and ask them to repeat it. Try to focus on a word or phrase that makes sense. Let them know when you do understand by repeating or rephrasing what they have said.
- If your memory impaired loved one repeatedly keeps asking the same question, calmly answer the question each time in a reassuring tone. They forget that they have already asked the question, or they forget the answer and just need reassurance. An alternative approach is to redirect the conversation to another topic or distract them by getting your loved one involved in an activity.
- Interact with the person with Alzheimer's/dementia within their own frame of reference for the world, even if it has little to do with reality. Do not correct or contradict their statements, instead, encourage and validate by really listening and asking questions. Contradicting their reality may cause agitation. Make every effort to go to their world, see it as they see it, and be respectful of their reality. This is often very difficult for family members and friends, but doing this can make communication and the overall relationship much more enjoyable.
- Acknowledge their emotions and feelings. Even if you do not understand what was said, you may recognize anger or sadness in their tone. Acknowledge their feelings by saying, "You sound very angry." Try to determine the reason for their emotion.
- Don't argue with someone with Alzheimer's disease or related dementia. This will only make things worse. The disease affects one's ability to be rational or logical.
- Don't be condescending. Treating someone like a child or talking down to them is likely to provoke anger. Even if the words are not completely understood, they will likely pick up on the tone. Always treat the person with Alzheimer's disease or dementia with dignity and respect. They are still a valuable person with talents and abilities, even though they may not be able to do some of the things or communicate as they once did.

Always remember that the person is not trying to be difficult on purpose. Your patience and calmness help create a caring environment that will encourage your loved one to keep trying.