

Alzheimer's San Diego

Communication Strategies



What is Dementia?

Dementia is a progressive brain disease in which two or more functions deteriorate significantly:

- **Memory:** short or long term
- **Cognition:** thinking, planning, reasoning and problems with language
- **Behavior:** changes with humor or personality
- **Physical Function:** fine motor skills, balance, coordination and sensory processing

Keep in mind: You can not control memory loss, only your reaction to it. For a person living with dementia, their disability is memory loss.

Common Challenges of Communication:

- Using the correct word and understanding the meaning
- Connecting what you see with what you hear
- Paying attention
- Filtering out the background noise
- Feeling frustration when communication is difficult
- Repeating questions or phrases

Techniques for Communication:

- **Forgive:** Move past negative reactions and accept blame (even when it is not your fault). Do not take things personally, question their memory, or blame them.
- **Slow down:** Adjust your expectations, it is possible to try later. Stay happy and affirming. Do not hurry them.
- **Keep it simple:** Provide brief explanations, repeat instructions or sentences in exactly the same way, and present the person with easy, straightforward options.
- **Be flexible:** Agree and validate the feelings of the person, or divert and redirect their attention. Do not try to reason, fight, or convince.

Understanding Anosognosia:

Anosognosia is a decline in self-awareness, a condition in which the person living with dementia does not appear aware of that disability. Many people with dementia do not recognize their own memory loss or changes with their abilities. **It is not useful to try to convince someone that they forgot.**

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Connecting the 5 Senses



- **Vision:** Photographs can activate memories or provide comfort and entertainment for someone who misses a loved one.
- **Sound:** Music is a powerful way to connect with a person with memory loss.
- **Touch:** A gentle touch on the shoulder allows the person with memory loss to recognize that you are talking to them.
- **Smell:** Certain scents can comfort – especially if that smell binds the person to a memory. Use flowers, relaxing fragrances, or a batch of fresh cookies baked from the oven.
- **Taste:** A favorite treat can be a good distraction or way to reminisce.

Real Life Examples

1) *"Why do I have to go the doctor? I'm fine."*

- **Advice:** Focus on giving short explanations and accept guilt
- **Response:** "It's just a regular checkup. I forgot to tell you, I'm so sorry."
- **Avoid trying to reason:** "You have seen this doctor every three months for the last three years. I wrote it down on the calendar and I told you yesterday and this morning."

2) *"I didn't write this check for \$500. Someone at the bank is forging my signature."*

- **Advice:** Focus on responding to feelings, reassuring & redirecting
- **Response:** "Oh my goodness, how scary. I'm sorry that happened. Let me see if I can call the bank and get to the bottom of this. This is not okay. While I'm looking for the phone number, can you help me fold some towels?"
- **Avoid arguing:** "What are you talking about? That is your signature, see! The bank wouldn't forge it."

3) *"Nobody is going to make decisions for me. Leave and do not come back!"*

- **Advice:** Focus on accepting blame, responding to the person's feelings, reassuring & redirecting
- **Response:** "I'm sorry this is a tough time. I love you and we are going to get through this together. You know what? Don has a new job. He's really excited about it."
- **Avoid arguing:** "I'm not going anywhere and you cannot remember enough to make your own decisions."

4) *"Who are you? Where is my husband?"*

- **Advice:** Focus on being flexible & reassuring
- **Response:** "I am a friend of your husband, Bob. He just went to the store and he'll be back in time for dinner."
- **Avoid taking it personally:** "What do you mean 'where's your husband?' I'm right here!"

5) *"I'm going to the store to buy a newspaper."*

- **Advice:** Focus on repeating the same thing
- **Response:** "Please put on your shoes...please put on your shoes."
- **Avoid repeating things differently:** "Please put your shoes on...you have to put your shoes on now."