



DementiaUK
Helping families face dementia

Tips for better communication



Difficulties with language and communication are common symptoms of dementia. As the condition progresses, it will gradually affect the way a person speaks, understands and interacts with other people and their environment.

Often, making small adaptations to how we communicate can make a big difference, helping to prevent confusion, misunderstandings and frustration. It can help build and maintain positive relationships that are based on care, compassion and support.



Understanding communication challenges in a person with dementia

Some of the communication challenges faced by a person with dementia may include:

- difficulty pronouncing or finding the right words
- problems following conversation, especially in a noisy environment
- difficulty understanding humour or sarcasm
- difficulty recognising other people's emotions or behaviours
- repeating themselves due to reduced concentration and attention or memory problems
- stress caused by trying to make sense of the environment, situations and other people
- difficulties with reading and writing which can impact on day-to-day activities eg reading post and emails, filling in forms or completing tasks at work



Common communication issues and how to help

It's helpful to be aware of the communication challenges people with dementia may face so you can put strategies in place that might stop their distress from escalating. You may wish to pull out these pages and keep them somewhere handy.

Here are some of the ways in which a person with dementia may communicate and how you could respond.

The person with dementia keeps asking for their mum or dad.

Possible reasons for communication

For many people, parents are associated with a sense of belonging, comfort, security or love. The person might be trying to experience these feelings again.

How you can help

Ask the person what their parents are/were like, and what things they like/liked doing together.

Listen carefully to their answers and provide affirmation, for example by saying, "Your mum sounds like a very special person."

If their relative has died, reminding them often may cause distress so you may decide it is best to gently change the topic of conversation.

The person keeps talking about needing to go to work, even if they are no longer working.

Possible reasons for communication

They may need to feel a sense of purpose – that they are useful and needed. They may have found a sense of identity in their working life that they no longer feel, or want to reminisce by telling you about their past occupation.

How you can help

Listen to the person's life experiences. Encourage them to take part in activities that might help them feel useful and purposeful – for example if they used to work in an office, they could help you sort out paperwork, or if they had a practical profession, they could help with simple DIY. Don't worry if it's not done the way you usually do it.

The person is having difficulty following conversations.

Possible reasons for communication

Changes in how people identify and process sounds can cause confusion and make it hard to follow conversations.

How you can help

Try to ensure only one person speaks at a time.

Face the person and speak slowly and clearly – people often use body language and lip reading to help them make sense of conversations.

Reduce background noise like the TV or radio.

Avoid noisy places such as restaurants and shopping centres as these can be overwhelming.

The person is struggling to find the right words.

Possible reasons for communication

Dementia often affects people's ability to use language, causing difficulty with word-finding and muddling words.

How you can help

Give the person time to find the right word themselves. If they are still struggling, calmly suggest the word they might be looking for, or ask questions to draw out what they are trying to communicate, eg, "Is there something you need from the kitchen?"

Encourage them to use non-verbal communication, eg pointing to what they are talking about or showing them pictures.

The person living with dementia says, "What are you doing in my house? Who are you?"

Possible reasons for communication

This might be due to loss of recognition of familiar people, faces and the environment. It could be due to fear or memory changes. If this occurs suddenly it could be indicative of an infection or physical ill health causing confusion, which needs medical intervention.

How you can help

Try to put yourself into the person's reality. Remind them verbally of who you are: "It's me, Julie, your daughter, and I've brought your grandson Danny to see you."

Think about other ways to remind the person who you are, eg wearing a perfume or an item of clothing that they associate with you.

Go into another room for a few minutes and then re-enter calmly, saying something like, "Hello Dad, I'm back now, lovely to see you."

Do not challenge or dismiss their thoughts – trying to correct them can cause distress.

The person is upset or angry and can't explain why.

Possible reasons for communication

They could be in pain or feeling unwell, or something could be irritating them about their environment, such as noise, bright light or a strong cooking smell.

They may be frightened and confused, or feeling alone or abandoned.

They may feel you are not listening to them or acknowledging their feelings.

How you can help

Recognise the person's non-verbal behaviours. Validate their feelings, for example by saying, "I can see you're angry about something – can I help?" or, "What is worrying you or upsetting you?" Listen to what they say and do not challenge or dismiss their thoughts and feelings.

Check for any cuts, bruises, redness or swelling that could be causing pain. Consider whether they may be in discomfort, for example from arthritis, toothache, a headache, or a urine or chest infection. Seek advice from a doctor if you're worried that they may be unwell.

Check the room to see if the temperature, lighting and noise level are comfortable for them.

Involve the person in one-to-one or small group-based activities according to their preference so they feel included and valued, eg going shopping together, doing a jigsaw puzzle or looking at photos.

The person is asking to go home when they are already at home. This is common in the early evening and is known as ‘sundowning’ – see Sources of support on p11 for more information.

Possible reasons for communication

They might be missing a sense of belonging, safety, security or familiarity, or remembering something that they used to do.

They may think that their parents are waiting for them to come home, or that they still live in the place where they spent their childhood or early life.

How you can help

Try to prevent sundowning by closing the curtains and turning on lights before dusk to ease the transition from day to night.

Listen to the person’s thoughts and respect their feelings. Avoid correcting or reasoning with them.

Ask them about their former home and what it was like. Look at old photos or videos to provide a sense of familiarity and peace of mind.

Try to distract the person by asking them to help you with a household task, making a cup of tea, watching something on TV or moving into another room.

Provide reassurance by holding their hand or stroking their arm, if they find this comforting.

The person looks confused and doesn't seem to understand you.

Possible reasons for communication

This could be due to a reduced level of understanding, difficulty concentrating or too many distractions.

They may have an underlying infection such as a urinary tract infection (UTI), which can cause a state of intense confusion called delirium (see Sources of support on p11).

How you can help

Be reassuring, compassionate and gentle. Remind them who you are and what their relationship is to you: "It's me, Mum, your son Amir."

Try saying or asking something in a different way, for example using shorter sentences and avoiding open-ended questions.

Give the person time to process and respond to your question.

Put yourself on their level – if they are sitting, sit down too – and make eye contact when you speak. If appropriate, use touch, for example to guide them gently to where they need to go.

Reduce external distractions when you are speaking. Maintain a quiet and calm environment. In busy situations such as family gatherings, designate a space that the person can retreat to if they are feeling overwhelmed, like a bedroom. If the person is younger and has children living at home, find their children an alternative activity to give their parent space if they are confused and overstimulated.

Consider possible health problems and book a GP appointment if necessary. If you suspect delirium, seek medical advice straight away.

The person becomes withdrawn or unresponsive.

Possible reasons for communication

This could be due to the progression of dementia causing damage in the areas of the brain responsible for speech and understanding.

They may be experiencing low mood or depression, causing them to avoid social contact and withdraw into themselves. Or they may be finding a public place or visitors overwhelming.

They may be physically unwell or experiencing delirium.

As a person nears the end of life, it is natural for them to become increasingly drowsy and withdrawn.

How you can help

Face the person and gain eye contact. Place a hand on their arm to attract their attention.

Pace your conversation. Don't give too much information or ask too many questions. Give them time to process information and respond.

Try asking the person if something is wrong and listening to their answer. If they express that they are feeling overwhelmed or need some time alone, find a way to give them the peace and quiet they need.

Consider booking an appointment with the GP to investigate whether depression or delirium could be a problem.

Bear in mind that this is a normal symptom as someone's dementia progresses through the mid to late stages, and while you can support them to engage with other people, it is important to be aware that the person may never go back to interacting and communicating as they used to.

Good communication skills to learn

We communicate a lot through our body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. If we come across as positive, cheerful and confident, we bring a sense of calm, kindness and reassurance to the conversation. Conversely, if we appear resentful or unhappy, dismissive or confrontational, it can create an atmosphere of gloom, fear or anger.

People living with dementia can often understand far more than they can express, so always involve them in communication. These tips may help – but bear in mind that communication is complex so they may work for some people but not others.

- Stop what you're doing and focus on the person – make sure you are fully present
- Treat the person as an adult – be careful not to patronise them or speak for them if they are capable of speaking for themselves with time and support
- Limit distractions like the TV, radio or busy locations – seek a calm environment
- Be aware of your behaviour and body language – if you are frustrated or angry, the person with dementia may sense this, so it may help to remove yourself from the situation briefly to calm down
- Say the person's name when talking to them
- Be specific – use people's names or the names of objects rather than she/he/it
- Touch the person's arm to make a physical connection and attract their attention, if they feel comfortable with this
- Use positive body language – smile and convey warmth and compassion
- Speak slowly, clearly and in short sentences
- Listen carefully with empathy – don't try to argue, reason with or correct the person
- Give the person plenty of time to answer questions or respond in conversation so they can organise their thoughts and find the right words

- Turn your body towards the person and make eye contact when you are speaking
- Use gestures to act out what you're saying, eg miming having a drink or putting on your shoes
- Use pictures to illustrate what you're saying, eg a photo of where you are going or who you are going to see
- Avoid open-ended questions or offering too many choices:
 - rather than saying, "Where shall we go today?" try saying, "Shall we go to the café or garden centre today?"
- If there is a sudden change in the person's ability to communicate and they seem more irritable, confused or distressed, visit the GP to find out if there is an underlying and potentially treatable cause, like pain or an infection

Sources of support

To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse about communication or any other aspect of dementia, please call our Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday to Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm) or email helpline@dementiauk.org

To book a phone or video call appointment with an Admiral Nurse, please visit dementiauk.org/book-a-clinic-appointment

Delirium

dementiauk.org/delirium

Coping with distress

dementiauk.org/coping-with-distress

Sundowning

dementiauk.org/sundowning

Creating a 'life story'

dementiauk.org/creating-a-life-story

Dementia and difficulty with sounds

dementiauk.org/dementia-and-difficulty-with-sounds

Things to try when someone with dementia stops recognising you

dementiauk.org/things-to-try-when-someone-with-dementia-stops-recognising-you

The information in this leaflet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses. We hope you find it useful. If you have feedback, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

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Thank you.



If you have questions or concerns about any aspect of dementia, please contact our Admiral Nurses.

Helpline: **0800 888 6678** or helpline@dementiauk.org

Virtual clinics: dementiauk.org/book-a-clinic-appointment



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Dementia UK, 7th Floor, One Aldgate, London EC3N 1RE
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