



**DementiaUK**

Helping families face dementia

# Tips for better communication with a person living with dementia

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## Introduction

Dementia is a complex condition and every person's experience is different. However, many people living with dementia do face similar challenges with communication.

Often the small changes we make in our approach can make a big difference in avoiding communication difficulties or frustration, and can also help build and maintain good relationships.



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## Understanding the challenges a person living with dementia may face with communication

The challenges may include:

- Tiredness or ill health which may cause a fluctuation in concentration and communication abilities
- Difficulty pronouncing or finding the right words due to changes in the brain
- Difficulty following a conversation, especially in a busy environment
- Difficulty understanding humour or sarcasm
- Difficulty recognising other people's emotions
- Repetition due to reduced concentration or memory problems
- Increased stress in trying to process information or make sense of things which can lead to further confusion



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## Good communication skills to learn

We communicate a lot through our body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. If we appear to be positive, cheerful and confident, we can bring a sense of hope and reassurance to the conversation, and conversely if we appear resentful or unhappy, we can bring a sense of gloom. You could try:

- Stopping what you're doing and focusing on the person
- Cut down on distractions
- Saying their name
- Touching the person's arm, if they feel comfortable with this
- Smiling
- Speaking slowly, clearly and in short sentences
- Listening carefully with empathy and understanding
- Giving the person plenty of time to answer
- Maintaining appropriate eye contact
- Using gestures or illustrate the meaning of what you're saying (e.g. miming drinking a cup of tea, or using photographs to explain)
- Using simple and straightforward language
- Being specific; try not to use pronouns such as he or she, use a person's name instead
- Avoiding using too many open-ended questions or offering too many choices

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## Common communication types and how you can help

You may notice that the person may be more confused, restless and disorientated at certain times in the day. This could be the lead up to them becoming more distressed and upset. It's useful to anticipate when you see small changes in behaviour so that you can intervene early. e.g. with activities and distraction techniques, which may reduce the escalation of stressed behaviour.

<b>Ways the person with dementia may communicate</b>	<b>Possible reasons for communication</b>	<b>How you can help</b>
The person living with dementia keeps asking for their mum or dad.	For many people, parents mean comfort/security/love. The person might be trying to experience these feelings again.	If you think the person may be feeling insecure, comfort them and offer them reassurance.
The person living with dementia keeps talking about needing to go to work when they are no longer in employment.	The person may need to feel a sense of purpose; that they are useful and needed.	Help preserve independence by encouraging the person to take part in household activities, such as dusting or drying up, even if it's not done the way that you would like it.
The person living with dementia is feeling sad or angry and can't explain why.	It could be a sign of unidentified pain or an irritant about the environment the person is in.	Check the temperature of the room and environment. Check for signs of bruising, redness, unusual swellings, or other conditions like arthritis, tooth ache or headache. Seek advice from a GP about pain relief. You could also validate the person's feelings by saying, "You look sad about something".

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<b>Ways the person with dementia may communicate</b>	<b>Possible reasons for communication</b>	<b>How you can help</b>
The person living with dementia is asking to go home when they are at home.	The person might be missing a sense of safety, security or familiarity.	Having a look at some familiar things could help, e.g. old photos or videos, or items around the home. Talk to them about their ‘home’ and give some reassurance.
The person living with dementia cannot find or use the right word for something.	Word finding difficulty maybe a direct result of changes to the brain, specifically the temporal lobe. It could also be due to tiredness, distress or a noisy environment.	Give the person plenty of time to reply and use pictures and notes if you can. Listen very carefully to the person and watch their body language. Reduce external distractions.
The person living with dementia looks confused, like they don’t understand you.	This could be due to a lower level of understanding, difficulty with concentrating or too many distractions.	Be reassuring and gentle. Try saying or asking in a different way. Give the person time. If appropriate, use touch. Reduce external distractions.
The person living with dementia becomes withdrawn or is not responding.	This could be due to difficulty with understanding or an inability to express themselves due to language problems, temporal lobe damage, or possible depression.	Face the person, and gain eye contact. Pace the conversation. Don’t give too much information or ask too many questions. Investigate whether depression could be an issue for the person through a visit to the GP.
The person living with dementia says: “What are you doing in my house? Who are you?”	Loss of recognition of familiar people, faces and environment. This could also be due to fear or memory changes. If this occurs suddenly it could be indicative of an infection or physical ill health causing some confusion, which needs medical intervention.	Try to understand the person’s reality. Remove yourself to another room for a few minutes and re-enter calmly and say something like, “Hello, I’m back now, lovely to see you.”

Communication is complex and the enclosed suggestions may work with some people but not with others. Always remember that people living with dementia can often understand far more than they can express, so always involve them in communication, and try out some of our hints and tips.

If there is a sudden change and the person living with dementia does seem more irritable and confused than before, it may require a visit to the GP to find out whether there is a reason for this e.g. infection, constipation, dehydration and physical ill health, which can all be treated.

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## **Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline**

For further advice and support please contact one of our specialist Admiral Nurses.

**Call 0800 888 6678 or  
email [helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)**

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