



**DementiaUK**  
Helping families face dementia

## Tips for better communication



### Introduction

Dementia is a complex condition and every person's experience is different. However, many people living with dementia can 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. It can help build and maintain good relationships.

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

Challenges may include:

- Difficulty pronouncing or finding the right words

- Problems following a conversation, especially in a noisy environment
- Difficulty understanding humour or sarcasm
- Difficulty recognising other people's emotions or behaviours
- Repetition due to reduced concentration or memory problems
- Tiredness or ill health which may cause a fluctuation in concentration and communication abilities
- Stress caused by trying to make sense of the environment, situations and other people



## Common communication issues and how you can help

A person with dementia might become more confused, restless and disorientated at certain times of the day. This could be the lead up to them becoming more distressed and upset. It's helpful to notice these small changes in behaviour so you can intervene with activities and distraction techniques, which might stop their distress from escalating. You may wish to pull out these pages and keep them somewhere handy.

Ways the person with dementia may communicate	Possible reasons for communication	How you can help
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.	Ask the person living with dementia what their parents are/were like, and what things they like/liked doing together.
They keep talking about needing to go to work even though they are no longer working.	They may need to feel a sense of purpose; that they are useful and needed.	Encourage them to take part in activities that might interest or mean something to them, such as household or garden tasks or helping you sort out paperwork. Don't worry if it's not done the way you usually do it.

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Ways the person with dementia may communicate	Possible reasons for communication	How you can help
They are feeling sad or angry and can't explain why.	They could be in pain, not feeling well or something could be irritating them about their environment.	<p>Validate their feelings eg, by saying, "You look sad about something" or, "what's bothering you?"</p> <p>Check for signs of bruising, redness, unusual swellings, or other things like arthritis, tooth ache, headache, urine or chest infection.</p> <p>Check the room to see if the temperature and lighting is ok for them.</p> <p>Seek advice about pain relief if you're worried that they may be unwell.</p>
They are asking to go home when they are at home.	They might be missing a sense of safety, security or familiarity, or remembering something that they used to do.	Reassure them by having a look at some familiar things eg, old photos, videos, or items around the home. Ask them about their 'home' and what it is like. Perhaps distract them by asking them to help you with something first (eg, household or garden chores).

Ways the person with dementia may communicate	Possible reasons for communication	How you can help
They look confused, and don't seem to 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.
They become withdrawn or are 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?"	This might be due to loss of recognition of familiar people, faces and 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 some confusion, which needs medical intervention.	Try to put yourself into their 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."

## Good communication skills to learn

We communicate a lot through our body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. If we seem positive, cheerful and confident, we 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
- limiting distractions
- saying their name when talking to them
- being specific; try not to use pronouns such as he or she
- use a person's name instead
- 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 to act out what you're saying eg, mimicking drinking a cup of tea or putting on your shoes
- using pictures to illustrate what you're saying eg, an image of a car or a photo of where you are going
- using simple and straightforward language
- avoiding too many open-ended questions or offering too many choices

Communication is complex and the enclosed suggestions may work with some people but not with others. People living with dementia can often understand far more than they can express, so always involve them in communication, using 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, visit the GP to find out whether there is a reason for this, eg, infection, constipation, dehydration and physical ill health, which can all be treated.

The information in this booklet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses.

We are always looking to improve our resources, to provide the most relevant support for families living with dementia. If you have feedback about any of our leaflets, please email [feedback@dementiauk.org](mailto:feedback@dementiauk.org)

We receive no government funding and rely on voluntary donations, including gifts in Wills.

For more information on how to support Dementia UK, please visit [www.dementiauk.org/donate](http://www.dementiauk.org/donate) or call **0300 365 5500**.

**Publication date: Dec 2020**  
**Review date: Dec 2022**  
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If you're caring for someone with dementia or if you have any other concerns or questions, call or email our Admiral Nurses for specialist support and advice.

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

Open Monday – Friday, 9am – 9pm  
Saturday and Sunday, 9am – 5pm



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