



Dementia and Communication

For somebody living with dementia, communication can become more difficult over time. How and when problems develop will depend on the individual, as well as the type of dementia they have and the stage it is at.

Communication changes someone with dementia may experience include:

- Inability to find the right word – may use alternative or incorrect words
- Difficulty understanding what is being said
- Short term memory issues may affect their ability to maintain a conversation
- Avoidance of distressing topics as they may be unsure how to respond to them
- Fear of saying the wrong thing
- Repeated utterance of particular words or phrases
- Slurred speech
- Use of curse words

*You can't control memory loss and changes in communication but you **can** control your reaction. Good communication can be key to helping somebody live well with dementia. It's worth considering how you would like someone to communicate with you if you were in the same situation.*

Here are some tips for supporting the person to communicate.

Try to avoid:

- Correcting or arguing with the person as this may affect their confidence and cause them to withdraw from conversations.
- Giving too much information in one sentence. (eg. 'Let's have a cup of tea now, then after that we can go for nice walk and get lunch in that café you like in town after we've been to the shops.'). This may be overwhelming and may cause them to refuse to go along
- Starting a sentence with 'Do you remember?' Rather than posing a question, try leading with 'I remember when...' instead. That way the person can search their memory calmly without feeling embarrassed, then join in if they want to.
- Giving information too far in advance (eg .about an event) as it may make them feel anxious
- Testing the persons memory (eg. what did you eat at Mary's house?) as this may undermine their confidence
- Talking about the person in front of them as this may also undermine their confidence
- Insistence about a particular point
- Using open ended questions ('where shall we go?' 'what do you want to eat/wear/do?') as they can create anxiety. Instead try giving a simple choice 'would you like apple pie or carrot cake?' or help them with their choice 'the red blouse looks really nice on you'

These things may help:

- Give the person time to answer a question or join in conversation
- One to one interactions as they may be easier than group conversations
- Use the persons name – it helps get their attention
- Use statements or actions instead of questions where possible. Eg. saying “Here is the toilet” pointing to the toilet door may be better than asking “Do you need to use the bathroom?”
- Show don’t tell - Demonstrating or beginning a task may be more helpful than verbally communicating it
- Enter the person’s reality - it doesn’t matter if the information is inaccurate. A positive interaction is whats important
- Avoid reasoning with the person as this may cause frustration
- Accept blame when somethings wrong (even if its fantasy)
- Ensure background noise eg. from radio or television is not causing distraction or distress
- Check the person is not distracted by other people or activities
- Be patient and reassuring (eg. I’m here for you). The person may not remember your reassurances so keep re-iterating them
- Leave the room if necessary to avoid confrontation or to de-escalate a situation
- Practise forgiveness, the person is not deliberately trying to exasperate you



Some final advice from families:

‘The person with dementia may not remember what you said but they will remember how you made them feel’

‘Lose the battle to win the war’

Please note: This leaflet was created by North Cork Dementia Alliance. Information contained within it is based on feedback from people with dementia and families and from a range of dementia publications.