effective communication strategies

Program goals

By the end of today’s program, you will be able to:

- Explain the communication changes that take place throughout the course of the disease.
- Decode the verbal and behavioral messages delivered by someone with dementia and respond in ways that are helpful to the person.
- Identify strategies to connect and communicate at each stage of the disease.

What is communication?
Communication changes throughout the disease

**Early stage (Mild)**
- Convey thoughts and feelings through language.
- Able to make decisions about future care.
- May misinterpret what others say.

**Middle stage (Moderate)**
- Use basic words and sentences.
- Rely more on tone of voice, facial expression and body language.
- Continue to need emotional connection and meaningful activity.

**Late stage (Severe)**
- May still respond to familiar words, phrases or songs.
- Use body language and the five senses to connect.

Communication in the early stage

Changes you may notice include:
- Difficulty finding the right words.
- Taking longer to speak or respond.
- Withdrawing from conversations.
- Struggling with decision-making or problem-solving.

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Communication in the early stage

To connect:
- Ask directly how to help with communication.
- Keep sentences clear and straightforward.
- Leave plenty of time for conversations.
- Include the person in conversations that affect him or her, including planning for the future.

Communication in the early stage

Keep in mind:
- Avoid making assumptions.
- Speak directly to the person.
- Communicate in the way that is most comfortable for the person. Options include phone, email, and in person.
- Laugh together.
- Be honest, laugh together, and stay connected with each other.

Communication in the middle stage

Changes you may notice include:
- Increased difficulty finding the right words.
- Using familiar words repeatedly.
- Inventing new words to describe familiar things.
- Easily losing train of thought.
- Speaking less frequently.
- Communicating through behavior rather than words more often.

Consult a doctor when you notice major or sudden changes.
Beverly is a caregiver support group facilitator whose husband has Alzheimer’s disease.

To connect, approach the person gently
- Approach from the front, say who you are and call the person by name.
- Maintain eye contact and get at eye level if seated or reclining.
- Avoid criticizing, correcting and arguing.
- Pay attention to your tone.
- Take your time.

Communication in the middle stage

Rebecca's mother had Alzheimer's disease.
To connect, join the person’s reality
Keep respect and empathy in your mind, then:
   Assess the person’s needs.
   Let the person know you hear his or her concerns, whether they are expressed through words, behavior or both.
   Provide a brief answer.
   Respond to the emotions behind the statement.

To connect, keep it slow and basic
   Use short sentences and basic words.
   Speak slowly and clearly, one person and one question at a time.
   Limit distractions.
   Be patient.
   Offer a guess or fill in words if acceptable.

To connect, give multiple cues
   Provide visual cues and gestures.
   Avoid sudden movement.
   Write things down for the person.
   Put answers into your questions.
   Repeat as needed.
   Turn negatives into positives.
   Avoid quizzing.
Communication in the middle stage

To connect, respond empathically and reassure
- Join the person's reality.
- Provide reassurance that you hear and understand.
- Focus on the feelings, not the facts.
- Validate and redirect the person if necessary.

Communication in the late stage

Changes you may notice include:
- Communication is reduced to a few words or sounds.
- Possible responses to familiar words or phrases.

To connect:
- Listen for expressions of pain and respond promptly.
- Help the person feel safe and happy.
- Continue to bring respect to each conversation.
- Keep talking.
- Use all five senses to communicate.

Sandra's mother is in the late stage of Alzheimer's disease.
### Communication in the late stage

#### Connect through touch
- Feel different fabrics.
- Identify shapes by touch.
- Give lotion hand massages.
- Identify everyday items in a bag by touch.
- Visit with animals.
- Sculpt using non-toxic materials.
- Hold the person's hand or stroke his or her arm or back.

#### Connect through sight
- Laminate brightly colored pictures to look at together.
- Watch videos of animals, nature or travel.
- Look at photo albums together.
- View photos of famous paintings, favorite settings or prominent people from the past.
- Go bird-watching or visit an aquarium.
- Paint with watercolors.
- Go outdoors or sit by an open window together.

#### Connect through sound
- Listen to familiar music.
- Listen to recordings of the sounds of nature, farms, cities or animals.
- Identify musical instruments by sound.
- Listen to songs or speech in the person's native language.
- Read books, poetry, scripture, or newspaper articles to the person.
- Let the person hear the gentle tone of your voice.
Communication in the late stage

Connect through smell
- Make small plastic bags containing items for the person to smell, such as:
  - Herbs or spices.
  - Cotton balls dipped in essential oils.
  - Grass clippings or fragrant flowers.
  - Teas or coffee beans.
- Use fragrant lotions for hand massages.
- Cook or feed the person foods that smell good, such as apple pie or chicken soup.

Communication in the late stage

Connect through taste
- Favorite foods.
- Home-baked goodies.
- Popsicles.
- Flavored drinks.
- Ice creams and puddings.

Communication in all stages of the disease
- Join the person’s reality to connect.
- Understand and accept what you can and cannot change.
- Remember that the person retains a sense of self despite the losses of the disease.
- Demonstrate respect and connect through feelings.
- Always treat the person as the adult he or she is.
- Try to decode the person’s communications.
- Recognize the effects of your mood and actions.
- Try to understand the source of reactions.
- Help meet the needs while soothing and calming the person.
Sam Fazio, Ph.D., is the Director of Special Projects for the National Office of the Alzheimer’s Association.

Contact us – we can help

- Alzheimer’s Navigator
- Community Resource Finder
- ALZConnected
- Alzheimer’s and Dementia Caregiver Center
- Safety Center

- Support groups, education programs and more available in communities nationwide

- Free online education programs available at training.alz.org

24/7 Helpline – Available all day every day

Get involved

- WALK TO END ALZHEIMER’S
- THE LONGEST DAY
- Volunteer
- Advocate
- Alzheimer’s Association Trial Match

- Available all day every day

- Free online education programs available at training.alz.org

- Get involved
Questions?

Alzheimer’s Association
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