



California Central Coast Chapter

Santa Barbara County
1528 Chapala St., #204
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
Tel: 805.892.4259

120 E. Jones St, #113
Santa Maria, CA 93454
Tel: 805.636.6432

San Luis Obispo County
71 Zaca Lane #110
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
Tel: 805.547.3830

Ventura County
2580 E. Main St Suite 201
Ventura, CA 93003
Tel: 805.494.5200

24-Hour Helpline:
800.272.3900

alz.org/CaCentral

Learning the Language of Dementia

Communication for people with dementia is like learning a new language; once you learn this language, the caregiver's frustration and the person with dementia's frustration will decline.

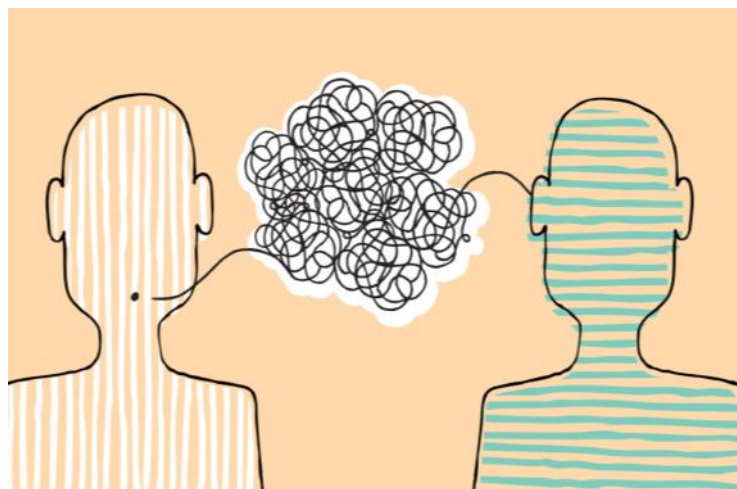
This also involves understanding that the disease is causing changes in the brain that affect communication such as forgetting words, repeated questions, frustration and behaviors.

Good communication helps modify behaviors and bad communication leads to bad behaviors.

Here are some points to consider when communicating with a loved one with dementia:

- ◆ People with dementia communicate through emotion and behavior. Focus on the feelings behind what is being said. Sometimes the emotions being expressed are more important than what is being said. Look for the feelings behind the words; the tone of voice or the action may provide you with clues to the real issue.

- ◆ Remember, they are frightened all the time, and



each person reacts differently to fear. Most of the time they cannot remember your assurances, and they must be repeated often. The disability is memory loss.

- ◆ When speaking, speak slowly and distinctly. Use short, simple sentences, and limit the amount of information you give at one time.

- ◆ Reason and logic will not work. Avoid talking about an upcoming event, such as a doctor's visit, until the day of the event. If told too far in advance, the person with dementia will worry about it and ask repeated questions about it.

- ◆ Yes and no questions are very successful. Remember they have limited attention

spans, and can only focus on one thought at a time. If the person does not answer the question, repeat it using the exact same words.

- ◆ Do not interrupt a person with dementia when they are speaking because the interruption may cause them to lose their train of thought.

- ◆ Your attitude and your mood are felt by the person even when you think they are off in another world.


Body language and the tone of your voice are important factors in communication.


If you are angry, impatient or rushed, the person with dementia will mirror that emotion.


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Caregiver Tips

When communicating with dementia, realize:


 They are unable to make sense of reason and logic.


 Arguing or confrontation will result in anger on both sides.


 Criticizing or correcting will remind the person that they are forgetting.


 Limit distractions so that the person can concentrate on you.

 Always offer comfort and reassurance.

 Be patient and supportive with their attempts at conversation.

 Keep your expectations realistic.

 Offer a guess if the person cannot find the word.

 Continue to have respect for the person as another human being.

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◆ Limit background distractions such as the TV, a noisy environment or too many people in the room. Approach the person from the front, on the same level as they are. For instance, if they are standing, you stand, or if they are sitting, so do you.

◆ Present a calm, patient and supportive manner, and offer the person comfort and reassurance. Give them time to process your statement or question before you get an answer.

◆ It is a well-known fact that we speak in generalities in our conversations with others, and we assume the person to whom we are talking to can decipher our meaning.

◆ People with dementia need very specific words and directions. Instead of telling the person with dementia to “Put those away,” say: “Please take the books here on the counter, and put them in the living room bookcase.”

◆ Caregivers should protect the person with dementia from harsh truths or realities and make it easier for their reality to accept facts. Is it lying, or is it a response given kindly to ease the person with dementia’s frame of mind?

◆ We have all been taught from childhood not to lie, and it’s difficult to change years of conditioning. Learning to finesse the truth, or by glossing over harsh truths, is a not only a kindness, it eases their worry.

◆ Saying good-bye to a loved one can be traumatic, but giving them a valid excuse for leaving can prevent anger and frustration. A valid excuse would be “I have to go do the laundry” or “I have to pick Julie up from school,” or another reason the person is familiar with.



◆ Telling a mother calling out for her babies that the children are sleeping, or telling someone who can no longer drive that the car is at the repair shop are some examples of finessing the truth.

◆ Following up with a distraction will help them forget about the issue. If a loved one has passed away, refrain from telling the person with dementia they have died.

◆ Since memory is the problem, they have forgotten this fact, and they will grieve again. Instead, ask them to talk about the person, or remind them of something they shared with the person; pictures are a great help here.



Resources:

Kohler, S. 2004. *How to Communicate with Alzheimer's*. Granny's Rocker Publishing,. Venice CA.
Robinson, A, Spencer, B. White, L. 2002. *Understanding Difficult Behaviors*. Eastern Michigan University. Ypsilanu, MI.