

- ❖ Pay attention to your tone of voice. Tone is as important as the words you say because the person with AD can sense your emotions.
- ❖ Explain your actions and break tasks and instructions into clear, simple steps, giving one step at a time.
- ❖ Ask one question at a time and give him time to respond. Rushing him will increase his confusion.
- ❖ Repeat questions or information using the same phrasing and words used before.
- ❖ Talk in positive terms. Limit the number of “don’ts” and avoid giving harsh or direct orders.
- ❖ Avoid expressions that she may take too literally (i.e., “shake a leg”).
- ❖ Demonstrate your request by drawing, pointing at or touching things.
- ❖ Use names when referring to other individuals, instead of saying “he” or “she.”
- ❖ Treat him with dignity and respect; remember that he is an adult. It is often easy to “talk down” to someone because you are using simple words or sentences. Remember that pet names such as “honey” can sound condescending.
- ❖ Ignore harmless hallucinations or delusions. Confrontation may make the situation worse. Respond with reassurance. Redirect her to another activity.
- ❖ If he looks as though he is not paying attention, try to communicate again in a few minutes.
- ❖ Use non-verbal communication (a smile, a hug) to reinforce verbal communication or to communicate when she can no longer understand words.

### **Non-verbal Communication:**

The person with AD can understand touching better than words. Holding her hand or putting your arm around her shoulder may get through to her when nothing else can. However, if the individual did not like being touched before she had AD; she may not like to be touched now.

When using non-verbal communication, remember to move slowly and touch gently; do not startle. Look to see if he is paying attention. Stand or crouch face-to-face to maintain eye contact. A smile can give reassurance. A hug or a kiss can express affection. Eye contact and facial expressions can show that you are paying attention.

The individual with AD also may use non-verbal communication to express her feelings. Your observation and sensitivity will help you understand her message.

### **For More Information:**

The Alzheimer's Association Midlands Chapter can provide you with additional suggestions on how to communicate with your loved one. For more information please call, 402-502-4300 or 1-800-272-3900.

### **Further Reading:**

The 36-Hour Day: A Family Guide to Caring for Persons With Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementing Illnesses by Nancy L. Mace and Peter V. Rabins, M.D. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981.\*

\*Available from the Alzheimer's Association Chapter's office.



## **Communication Tips For Caregivers Of Individuals With Alzheimer's disease**

**alzheimer's association**

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### **Midlands Chapter**



[www.alz.org/midlands](http://www.alz.org/midlands)

## What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a progressive, degenerative disease that attacks the brain and results in impaired memory, thinking and behavior. It affects an estimated 4.5 million American adults.

AD develops gradually. Problems remembering recent events and difficulty performing familiar tasks are early symptoms. Additionally, the individual with AD may experience confusion, personality change, behavior change, impaired judgment, and difficulty finding the right words, finishing thoughts, or following directions. How quickly these changes occur will vary from person to person, but the disease eventually leaves its individuals totally unable to care for themselves.

## How AD Affects Communication:

Communication is a common problem associated with AD. The affected individual may not be able to make herself understood or may not be able to understand what others are trying to tell her.

You may have noticed that your loved one substitutes a word that sounds similar to the word he cannot remember. Sometimes the person suffering from AD substitutes a word with a similar meaning for the word he cannot remember. He may try to describe the object he cannot name or he may invent new words to describe thoughts or objects.

If the person with AD can remember only a few key words she may use them over and over, even if they have no meaning. This can be especially disturbing if the individual swears or makes tactless remarks without realizing their impact.

Problems with communication also may result when the individual cannot organize thoughts into words or cannot communicate all of the words in a thought.

If your loved one has been covering up problems with communication, he/she may become angry or defensive at times when he cannot find the words to respond to a question or a comment. At times, you may think he/she is being uncooperative, when in fact he/she simply cannot understand what you are trying to say.

Your feelings will affect how and what you communicate to each other. If communicating is difficult for the individual with AD, it can also be frustrating and depressing. As a result, he/she may cry or become angry if his/her frustration, or your frustration, becomes too great. If you can hold back your frustration, he/she will probably feel less frustrated.

The individual with AD also may be feeling confused, anxious, self-conscious, depressed, angry and/or afraid. You may be feeling many of the same emotions, and her difficulty with communication may be one more reminder that you are losing this special person.

If you are having problems communicating with someone who has AD, first make sure that the person is not suffering from a hearing impairment. Then, keep the following in mind: The person with AD may quickly forget even the information he understood; he may still be able to read, but he may not be able to understand the thought behind what he has read; he may not be able to act on what he has read or heard; and even if he can understand what he is told in person, he may not be able to understand what he is told over the phone.

In the early stages of the disease, communication may be helped by the use of signs, labels or written messages that can be reassuring and comforting to the individual. Especially at this time, it is important to assume that your loved one can understand more than she can express. **Never talk about her as if she was not there.**

As the disease progresses, your loved one will be less able to communicate, and eventually, may be unable to speak. Non-verbal communication, such as touch or laughter, may be useful. The person with AD can understand non-verbal communication and humor much longer than he can understand spoken communication. Even when the individual is unable to communicate, he will still need affection, and you can communicate that by touch.

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## Helping the Person Communicate:

Helping someone communicate takes patience and understanding. Below are some suggestions for helping your loved one get the message across:

- ❖ Be calm and supportive. Maintain eye contact and use touch to reassure him and show that you are listening.
- ❖ Show your interest in what she is saying or feeling.
- ❖ Pay attention to his voice and gestures for clues to what he is feeling. Sometimes, his emotions are more important than what he is trying to say.
- ❖ If you don't understand what she is trying to say, let her know, and encourage her to point or gesture.
- ❖ If he cannot find a word, he may be less frustrated if you offer a guess.
- ❖ If she uses the wrong word and you know what she means, supply the correct word. If this upsets her, do not correct future mistakes.
- ❖ If he is upset and cannot explain verbally, offer comfort and reassurance. Trying to get him to explain may make him more upset.

## Helping the Person Understand:

Below are some suggestions on how you can help your loved one understand what you are trying to say:

- ❖ Approach him from the front but be aware that some individuals feel more comfortable if you talk from a handshake distance away.
- ❖ Keep confusion, distraction and noise to a minimum.
- ❖ Begin each conversation by identifying yourself and addressing her by name to orient her and get her attention.
- ❖ Speak slowly and distinctly. Use a lower voice pitch to convey a sense of calm. This also will be easier for the hearing-impaired person to hear.
- ❖ Use short, simple, familiar words and sentences.

