Alzheimer Society
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ASKING EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

Questions are powerful and control the direction of the conversation. The person who asks questions is in control of the conversation. Questions have the power to change a person's beliefs, behaviours or awareness of the issues.

- **For information** – ask the "five W's and the H": who, what, where, when, why and how
- **To give information** – "In this situation would you consider…?" or "What would you think of…?"
- **To plant an idea** – "Have you ever wondered if…?" or "Are you ready to consider…?"
- **To signal an end** – "So, our next steps are…?"

Some points to remember:

- Ask questions in a polite, tactful, respectful and non-threatening manner.
- Give people time to answer; some experts suggest counting slowly, up to eight, allowing a person time to consider how to answer the question.
- Ask only one question at a time, stating the question clearly.
- Listen carefully to the answer and then restate it in your own words to ensure that you understand the reply.

Good questioning techniques:

a) Have a purpose
b) Create a safe environment
c) Start with general, open questions, gradually moving to more specific, direct questions
d) Listen actively

a) Have a purpose

This means focus on what information you need from this conversation.

- What do you want to achieve with the question?
- What is your final objective?
- Do you want general information?
- Do you want to establish rapport

- Do you want to gain support?
- Do you want to influence or convince?
- Do you want to understand the person and their ideas better?

b) Create a safe environment

You might want to start off the conversation by asking permission to ask questions, such as, "Could I ask you some questions?" effectively setting a tone of respect, a willingness to listen carefully, thus developing a mutual trust. Don't put the person on the 'hot seat'.

- Establish and maintain rapport by asking questions politely. Don't interrogate.
- Make this a two-way communication by being willing to share information about you.
- Be sincere, interested and helpful – responses you get are at least partly determined by how you ask the question.
- Be observant. If the person sits or stands – do the same. Look for body language – if you haven't made an appointment and the person says they have time to talk but keeps looking at their watch or computer screen, it may best to ask for a meeting time rather than push ahead with the conversation without securing the person's whole attention.
- Watch the amount of eye contact. Too much is threatening and too little might indicate disinterest.

c) Start with open questions and move to more direct questions

Think of a journalist getting a story and start by asking general questions to discover the person's position. Listen for key words or phrases as well as the benefits the person considers important. Focus your attention on the person – that person is the star of the conversation at this point. "Tell me about…" "How do you feel about…?" "What is your position on…?"

After establishing rapport your questions can become more specific. Acknowledge common ground. Try to phrase the question in order to get a 'yes" answer, which maintains a positive tone. Confirm the person's concern or position. You can confirm support by ending with a more open question again, such as, "If …could happen, what steps would you suggest to achieve that goal?"

d) Listen actively

Probe further for understanding. 70 to 90 % of what is said is misunderstood and only 25% is retained. This selective listening is a barrier to good communication. Don't put words in the person's mouth, search for complete understanding. "Please tell me more about…?" "What others you about…" "What is important to you?"

Reflect the key ideas and words you heard to ensure you received the message clearly. You may not agree or like what you heard, but it's important to understand it completely before you will know what further steps you can take in your advocacy. Once the speaker's position is clear, you can state your own.

Finally, summarize what has been agreed upon and to avoid confusion, such as, "Is there anything else we've missed?" "Do you understand my perspective on this situation?"

e) Be persuasive

Convince yourself that you can do it – that you can persuade this person to accept your position.

Be natural and spontaneous. Breathe deeply. Be yourself. Be present and involved in the conversation.

Try to train yourself out of using distracting words like 'um". Don't fidget or play with your pen etc. Don't hide your emotions – but don't let your emotions dictate the direction of the conversation. The person you are trying to persuade needs to know how you feel about your concern. Know and understand what you hear, see and feel, before you say what it is you want. Show that you have taken the time to understand this person and what is important to them.

Look for a sign of acceptance to your position – this helps you to know what steps to take next.

** adapted from Secrets of Face-to-Face Communication by Peter Urs Bender & Dr. Robert A. Tracz*