

COMMUNICATING WITH A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA: TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Some suggestions for engaging the person in conversation

NOTE: The material in this section, "Some suggestions to engage the person in conversation", has been adapted from the book, Talking to Alzheimer's, by permission of the author. Copyright 2001 by Claudia J. Strauss. Full citation below.

Getting a conversation started

You may not be sure if the person remembers who you are. Rather than "test the waters", here are some possibilities:

- "Hi, Mary, I came to visit you. Is this a good time?"
- "Hi, Bob, it's me, Jane! Okay if I stay and talk for a while?"

If the person says, "I don't know you", you can say, "I'm glad to meet you, my name is Jane. I enjoy spending time with you."

Questions to ask

It is usually better to ask close-ended questions rather than open-ended questions. Close-ended questions can be answered with "yes", "no", "maybe" or "I don't know" or "I don't remember." Here are some examples:

- "Do you like to watch television?"
- "Would you like to go for a walk with me?"
- "Does the sandwich taste good?"
- "I like hearing the story of your first job. Do you feel like telling me now?"

Some open-ended questions might work, such as:

- "How did your day go?"
- "How are you?"

When you can't understand what the person is saying

Sometimes a person will start a sentence and will not be able to finish it or the words don't make sense. One approach is to acknowledge what is happening: "It's frustrating for us, isn't it? You can't find the words you want and I'm having trouble guessing what you mean. I'm sorry."

This approach maintains respect for the person in showing that you understand the situation. If the person doesn't want to continue, re-assure the person with a hug and suggest doing something in the meantime, "We can figure it out later, let's walk the dog."

Ways to indicate you are listening

Here are some suggestions to continue the conversation:

- "How interesting!"
- "Thanks for telling me that."
- "Sounds like a plan."
- "I see what you mean."
- "I didn't know that."
- "Is that so?"
- "How nice."
- "Okay."

Ways to say "no"

Sometimes you have to say "no". Here are a variety of ways to say it:

- "I wish I could."
- "That's an idea, but this isn't a good time."
- "I think it is too cold/hot today."
- "Did you notice it is raining/snowing today? How about we try another time?"

Ways to encourage involvement in an activity

Sometimes a person might be more interested in getting involved in an activity if it is an opportunity for the person to be independent. Here are some suggestions:

- “I’m looking forward to it. Would you like to come along?”
- “I’d enjoy it more if you kept me company.”
- “I’m pretty hungry. Would you mind if I joined you?”
- “It’s great to do things together.”

Ways to end a conversation

Ending a conversation might mean that a meaningful time together has to come to an end. The person might feel lost or lonely. Remind the person how much you have enjoyed his/her company and that you will be back soon. Here are some suggestions:

- “I always feel good after talking to you.”
- “It’s so much fun talking to you. You tell great stories.”
- “Seeing you is the best part of my day.”

You can also tell the person that you need to go to work, or do homework, or have dinner. Try the following:

- “I need to cook dinner and I still need to do the shopping.
I better go.”
- “I didn’t realize how late it was. I need to get to work early.”

Things to keep in mind

- Feelings remain despite the losses caused by Alzheimer's disease. Feelings may be the only way a person understands what is going on.
- We all communicate by emotion, expression and touch. Holding a hand, or smiling when talking can convey more than any words.
- We should always be aware of our body language and of our facial expressions. Harsh glances can be just as negative as harsh words.
- The person must be included in conversations. It is painful to be talked about as if one isn't there.

Day to Day

Quality of life for people with Alzheimer's disease is largely dependent on their interactions and relationships with others. Maintaining a connection can be a complex and challenging process. Some days it may seem that nothing is understood, while on others much is exchanged and felt. Try to make the most of the good days. Let the person help you through the tough ones. Keep trying. It is important to remember that you are doing the best you can.

The material in this handout has been adapted from:

Day to Day: Communication, Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2007.

Resources:

The Alzheimer Journey, Module 4, Understanding Alzheimer Disease: The link between brain and behaviour, video and workbook series, the Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2002.

Talking to Alzheimer's: Simple ways to connect when you visit with a family member or friend, Claudia J. Strauss, New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2001, ISBN 1-57224-270-1.

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