Tips for dementia-friendly phone calls

A few simple strategies can make your phone calls more dementia friendly. Think of these tips as tools in a toolbox—you won't need to use every tip with every person or on every call. Take time to understand the preferences of the person on the other end of the call and avoid making assumptions about their abilities.

Before the call

- ☐ **Be prepared:** If you are making the call, gather any necessary information, documents or materials you may need ahead of time.

- ☐ **Help the person you are calling prepare:** Where possible, share a list of questions you will be asking and advise them of any documents or information they should gather.

- ☐ **Keep the agenda simple:** Focus on the essential topics that need to be discussed right away. Avoid adding last-minute items or things that can be addressed in a future call or in person.

- ☐ **Choose a quiet environment:** Where possible, move to a quiet space where you can give the person your full attention and hear them clearly.

- ☐ **Consider other communication options:** A phone call might be challenging for a person living with dementia, as they don't have access to visual cues that will support their understanding, such as facial expressions, gestures or environmental context. They may also be distracted by background noise or activities you're unaware of. Would a virtual meeting or video call be more effective?

- ☐ **Ask about their preferences:** While other technologies may be an option, each person has different comfort levels and some may prefer speaking on the phone, which may be more familiar to them. When discussing their preferences, you might want to ask:

  – What time of day works best for a call?

  – Do they prefer scheduled calls or is it okay to call spontaneously?

  – If it's a scheduled call, would they appreciate a reminder? If so, when and how would they prefer to receive it (e.g., a reminder the day before or the day of, via email or voicemail)?

  – Would they be comfortable with you leaving a voicemail?

– Would they like a written summary of the phone call? If so, how would they prefer to receive it?

☐ **Assess your own state of mind:** If you have time before the call, take a moment to check in with yourself. Are you feeling relaxed, or are you rushed or stressed? Your emotional state can affect your tone, pitch and speaking pace, which in turn impacts the other person's ability to understand you. Set yourself up for a positive interaction by ensuring you're fully present and in a calm state of mind.

During the call

Many in-person communication strategies apply to phone calls with a few adjustments:

- **Start the call by orienting the person to who you are and why you are calling:** Give your name, where you work, your role and why you are calling. Be sure to take your time.

- **Check in at the start:** Even if the call was scheduled, check in with the person at the beginning to ensure this is a good time for them to talk on the phone.

Pause and wait for a response

Pause again and wait for a response

Another pause as you wait for their response

- **Use their name:** If needed, call the person by name to help draw their attention and encourage engagement.
- **Speak clearly and focus on one message at a time:** Be sure to articulate each word clearly and fully. This not only helps with clarity but also slows down your speaking pace. Introduce one topic or question at a time and emphasize key words. Avoid using complex sentences, technical terms or slang.
- **Speak naturally:** Avoid over-articulating or raising your voice, as it could distort your message or make you sound frustrated or patronizing.
- **Allow extra time for response:** The person on the other end may need extra time to process what you've said, gather their thoughts and respond. This may be particularly challenging on the phone, where neither of you has access to visual cues.
- **Listen actively and encourage them to take their time:** This will let them know that you value what they say and will help you avoid interrupting or talking over them.
- **Adapt to the person's vocabulary and speaking pace, simplifying when necessary:** This approach fosters respectful communication and helps avoid unintentionally making the person feel undervalued.
- **Ask closed-ended questions if needed:** If you need to repeat a question, consider rephrasing with a closed-ended question. For example, instead of asking, "How can I help you today?" try offering two or three options, like "Are you calling to register for a program or would you like to speak with a staff member?" Alternatively, ask yes/no questions like "Are you calling to register for a program?"
- **Minimize distractions:** If there's background noise on their end, respectfully ask if they can move to a quieter location, turn down the TV or radio, or ask if there's a better time for you to call back.
- **Engage everyone on the call:** If another person is present on the call (e.g., a spouse, family member or friend), continue to involve the person living with dementia in the conversation.
- **Be patient and flexible:** Recognize that dementia symptoms can fluctuate and some days or times of day may be more challenging than others. If the call is difficult for them, reassure them that it's okay to try again later.
- **Don't rush the conversation:** Allow enough time for the person to finish their thoughts and respond to any questions.

After the call

- **Reflect on the call:** Take a moment to evaluate what went well and what could be improved for next time. Consider whether there are additional ways you or your colleagues can support the person.
- **Document positive outcomes:** Write down what went well and think about how you can share this feedback with your colleagues.
- **Provide written notes if requested:** If the person has asked for notes after the call, follow-up in a timely manner and refer to Dementia-Friendly Canada's **Tips for Dementia-Friendly Written Material** for guidance.

For more information, quick reference tip sheets and short videos on communication tips, please visit the Dementia-Friendly Canada resources page at **alzheimer.ca/dfc/resources**.

For more information, or to learn more about dementia and dementia-friendly communities, reach out to the **Alzheimer Society of British Columbia and Yukon** or visit the **Dementia-Friendly Canada website**.

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