

Tips for speaking/interviewing people who have dementia

Dementia is an overall term for a set of symptoms that are caused by disorders affecting the brain. Symptoms may include memory loss and difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language, severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities. A person with dementia may also experience changes in mood or behaviour.

How does dementia affect communication?

Although each individual is unique, dementia has a profound effect on the language abilities of people living with the disease and therefore can affect the way they communicate. This language degeneration is known as aphasia. Individuals with aphasia experience difficulty expressing themselves, finding the right words, understanding the words heard or reading and writing.

Every case of dementia is different. Therefore each individual may exhibit different communication challenges. The following are common:

- Have difficulty understanding humour, jokes, and fast talk.
- Have difficulty following multiple step instructions.
- Require increased concentration to follow conversations.
- Have difficulty finding a word.
- May create new words.
- May repeat a word or phrase.
- Have difficulty organizing words into logical sentences.
- May curse or use language that can offend.
- Have trouble staying on topic.
- Lose their train of thought more often.

**Be person-centred when speaking/interviewing**

- Approach the individual from the front, address them by their name if possible.
- Speak slowly and clearly in a normal tone. There is no need to speak loudly.
- Present one idea at a time.
- Allow time for a response. Don't respond for them.
- Allow lots of time for the interview. Being rushed puts more pressure on the person with dementia.
- Explain how things are going to go; if there are cameras let the person know when they will be moving and where

*If you have questions or would like to speak about strategies for communicating, please contact the Alzheimer Society of Nova Scotia at 902-422-7961 and ask to speak to InfoLine.*