



Improving Our Communication

With Those Living With Dementia

CPI EXCLUSIVE DOWNLOAD

> **Good listening skills are essential when communicating with a person living with dementia. As loved ones, we must listen with our ears, eyes, and hearts.**



About DCS and CPI

Dementia Care Specialists (DCS) provides state-of-the-art dementia care training, resources, and consulting services that help transform staff capabilities and quality of care. As a result, people living with dementia experience a higher quality of life, caregivers find more satisfaction, and providers improve their caregiving and business results. We believe that every person living with dementia has many remaining abilities that, when recognized and nurtured, can lead to a life of quality at each stage of the disease.

CPI is the standard in behavior intervention training that equips employees to have an immediate, tangible, and lasting positive impact on the people and organizations they serve.

Part of a series, this guide describes how family members, friends, or volunteers can use DCS principles and strategies to support those living with dementia.

You will learn:

- Why people living with dementia may have issues with communication.
- Examples of how communication can be frustrating for a person living with dementia.
- Practical strategies you can use to improve your communications.
- Suggestions to enhance your loved one's ability to communicate.
- Simple steps to develop your own listening skills.

Self-Assessment

The following questions will help you identify areas of communication you may be able to improve when communicating with persons living with dementia. Think about someone you know who has dementia, and answer the questions the best you can.

1. **True or False** When you have trouble communicating clearly with others, you can become frustrated.
2. **True or False** A person living with dementia can process verbal communication just like anyone else.
3. **True or False** When communicating with a person living with dementia, speak louder and enunciate each word clearly so they are able to understand you.
4. **True or False** Listening to persons living with dementia is not really critical because they will forget anything you do or say in a few minutes.
5. Why do you think communication may be more difficult for someone living with dementia?
6. On a scale of 1–5, how effective would you say you are at communicating with a person living with dementia? (1 = Not very effective; 3 = OK; 5 = Very effective)

1 2 3 4 5

Self-Assessment Answers

1. **True** When you have trouble communicating clearly with others, you can become frustrated.
2. **False** A person living with dementia can process verbal communication just like anyone else.
3. **False** When communicating with a person living with dementia, just speak louder and enunciate each word clearly so they will understand you.
4. **False** Listening to persons living with dementia is not really critical because they will forget everything you do or say within just a few minutes.
5. Answers will vary based on the individual's experience and knowledge of dementia. This guide can help provide some understanding of why and what you can do.
6. Answers will vary. Regardless of how effective you are now when communicating with a person living with dementia, this information may help you be more effective in the future. Understanding more about communication and improving your skills will help improve the life of the person in your care who is living with dementia.

Understanding Why Communication Is Problematic

Defining communication

Communication is an interchange of information. It is both verbal and nonverbal. Communication is how we relate to others. It is an important part of our relationships. The ability to exchange our ideas, wants, and feelings is a basic need. Communication is often explained in two forms. Expressive communication is the ability to communicate information to or with others. Receptive communication is the ability to process information, understand the message, and react accordingly. We often use behavior as a form of communication.

During the progressive stages of dementia, the person's ability to understand another person's communication is compromised. These changes in receptive communication can lead to frustration, mood swings, depression, and isolation.

The person may:

- Misinterpret what is communicated.
- Not respond to instructions or respond incorrectly. For example, lengthy directions could result in someone getting confused.
- Become frustrated or angry due to lack of communication and an inability to relate to others.
- Have difficulty processing directions and requests with multiple steps.

In addition, during the progression of dementia, their ability to communicate verbally changes and declines. Therefore, the person may:

- Repeat comments over and over again, as if hearing them for the first time.
- Communicate less with words.
- Communicate more with facial expressions, posture, and demonstration of emotions.
- Engage less in conversation with you or others.
- Become easily frustrated or angry when not understood by others.
- Use their behavior to communicate needs, pain, or feelings.

Enhancing the Communication Process

Loved ones have the ability to change the way we communicate and change the environment. Below are some suggestions to enhance communication with the person living with dementia.

- Eliminate distractions. Find a place that is quiet.
- Gain attention, make eye contact, and lead with the person's name. Sit next to the person, and use the name or nickname that is most familiar to the person.
- Speak slowly and simply, and use short sentences. Lengthy stories may become overwhelming.
- Add visual cues to aid in communication. Point or use other gestures or pictures.
- Repeat information or questions as needed. The person may quickly forget information or ask for information to be repeated.
- Be aware of your nonverbal communication. Your tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions can change the meaning of words.
- Use close-ended questions instead of open-ended questions. For example, instead of saying, "What would you like to eat for dinner?" say, "Would you like to have fish or a hamburger?"
- Wait for a response. Processing information is slowed with the progression of dementia. Wait for the person to respond before adding more information. You might have to wait up to 15 seconds or more for a response.
- Avoid criticizing or arguing. If you disagree with the person, let it be. Criticizing or arguing may result in anger and more frustration.

To enhance communication with persons living with dementia, we need to focus on what we can change: our behavior, our communication, our understanding, and our ability to listen.

Suggestions for Improving Listening

Good listening skills are essential when communicating with a person living with dementia. As loved ones, we must listen with our ears, eyes, and hearts. We need to practice Empathic Listening. This includes:

- **Give your undivided attention.** Limit distractions (e.g., TV, music, or other conversation) that may divert your attention.
- **Be nonjudgmental.** Avoid criticizing or expressing an opposing opinion.
- **Focus on feelings.** Listen to the feelings in the person's voice, facial expression, gestures, and body language. Validate those feelings.
- **Allow for silence.** Before repeating comments or questions, wait for a response.
- **Use restatement to clarify.** Repeat a person's words or restate the words to ensure you understand.
- **Watch your own tone and body language.** Your tone of voice, posture, gestures, and expressions may communicate much more than your spoken words.

Just as communication is an exchange of information, listening is an exchange of understanding, empathy, and caring.



What Else We Can Do

Our nonverbal communication becomes even more important as the person progresses in the stages of dementia. Our presence, where we sit, a caring touch, our voice, and gestures of care, etc., can communicate understanding, reassurance, belonging, and love to the person living with dementia. Our communication should include:

- **Setting a positive mood and offering comfort, affection, and reassurance.** Relieve their frustration by providing support and touch.
- **Encouraging unspoken communication.** As language becomes less of an option for the person, consider asking the person to point or use gestures or even pictures.
- **Breaking activities down into less complicated steps.** Completing tasks with many steps is more difficult as dementia progresses. For example, asking the person to get dressed involves many steps. Start by asking the person to put on a shirt. Next, hand them their pants and ask the person to put on the pants. Next, the socks, and then the shoes.
- **Treating the person as an adult with dignity and respect.** Avoid talking down to the person as if they were a child. Avoid talking as if they were not in the room.
- **Using humor when appropriate.** Laughing is good for us and good for your loved one. A person living with dementia may enjoy laughing along with you.
- **Validating feelings.** Let the person know that you understand they are feeling frustrated, angry, afraid . . . or happy or loved.

Understand that although the person is progressing through stages of dementia, they are still the person you have loved your entire life.

Improving Our Communication With Persons Living With Dementia

Post-Test

1. **True or False** A person living with dementia may have trouble communicating, become frustrated, misinterpret instructions, or experience delays in responding to you.
2. **True or False** Persons living with dementia may often repeat what they say, engage less in conversations, and become agitated or angry due to their changing ability to communicate.
3. **True or False** It is best to offer persons living with dementia many choices to confuse or distract them, and simply try to ignore them until they calm down.
4. Select suggestions you can use to enhance your communication with someone living with dementia.
 - Eliminate distractions such as the TV or other background noises.
 - Ask close-ended questions instead of open-ended questions.
 - Use visual cues or prompts as needed. Raise your voice and remain firm, so as to remind them you are in charge.
 - Wait for a response and allow extra time to process.
5. Select the following strategies that you can use to improve your listening skills with a loved one living with dementia.
 - Give your undivided attention.
 - Be nonjudgmental.
 - Ignore them and talk to others in the room.
 - Allow for silence.
 - Monitor your own tone and body language.
6. Finish this sentence: "The next time I communicate with my loved one living with dementia, I will _____."

Post-Test Answers

1. **True** A person living with dementia may have trouble communicating, become frustrated, misinterpret instructions, or experience delays in responding to you.
2. **True** Persons living with dementia may often repeat what they say, engage less in conversations, and become agitated or angry due to their changing ability to communicate.
3. **False** It is best to offer persons living with dementia many choices to confuse or distract them, and simply try to ignore them until they calm down.
4. Select suggestions you can use to enhance your communication with someone living with dementia.
 - Eliminate distractions such as the TV or other background noises.
 - Ask close-ended questions instead of open-ended questions.
 - Use visual cues or prompts as needed.
 - Raise your voice and remain firm, so as to remind them you are in charge.
 - Wait for a response and allow extra time to process.
5. Select the following strategies that you can use to improve your listening skills with a loved one living with dementia.
 - Give your undivided attention.
 - Be nonjudgmental.
 - Ignore them and talk to others in the room.
 - Allow for silence.
 - Monitor your own tone and body language.
6. Finish this sentence: “The next time I communicate with my loved one living with dementia, I will . . .” Examples of responses may include:
 - Use fewer words, or shorter phrases and sentences, instead of lengthy stories.
 - Address them by name.
 - Repeat what I say as needed.
 - Allow them time to respond.
 - Give them my undivided attention.
 - Be aware of my nonverbal communication.
 - Validate their thoughts, feelings, and conversations.

Thank you! We hope you found this information helpful.

Please feel free to share this resource with a friend or colleague.

Have questions? We're here for you!

Give us a call at **800.558.8976** or email

[**info@crisisprevention.com**](mailto:info@crisisprevention.com)

About Dementia Care Specialists (DCS)

DCS provides state-of-the-art dementia care training, resources and consulting services that help transform staff capabilities and quality of care. We educate, empower, and enrich the lives of these professionals and those in their care living with dementia.

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