

“Can you hear me now?”

Quick tips for better dementia communication

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We spend our whole lives learning how to communicate with each other. In order to function, you have to be able to understand a person’s message and communicate back to them to get your point across. Communication is essential in our everyday lives. For a person living with some sort of cognitive impairment, communicating becomes a little more difficult. Because of changes in the brain caused by a variety of issues, from effects of a stroke, changes from Alzheimer’s disease, etc., a person may begin to have difficulty with understanding language or being able to find the right words to communicate. This creates challenges for not only the person living with the impairment, but also everyone around them. As family, friend, or caregiver, what can you do to make it a little bit easier for your loved one?

In my work, I meet with families exasperated and exhausted, trying to keep up with how their loved one communicates in this stage of their life. I try to convey to them how they are essentially learning a new language. And like any new language, it takes practice and time to really grasp how to communicate effectively. If you’re in this position now, here’s some guidance on how to make this process a little bit easier.

Take it slow

Because of the damage occurring in the brain, processing times (the time it takes our brain to receive, decipher, and understand a message) is greatly impaired. Allow your loved one plenty of time to make sense of what you’re trying to communicate to them. A good general rule is allowing your loved one 10-15 seconds to process. This may vary depending on your loved one’s disease. You might also have to repeat yourself after giving them plenty of time to process. Try to keep what you are saying short and simple, and remember not to get frustrated if you have to repeat yourself.

You don’t have to be right

There will, likely, be many times that you know that something your loved one is saying is not correct. “We visited Aunt Sharon in 2012, not 2014.” “It’s been almost a year since we’ve seen the doctor.” Does this sound familiar? The reality is that there will be many times when you will have to make a choice – try to reason with your loved one that, no, we actually did visit Aunt Sharon in 2014 and, no, we saw the doctor last month *or* to make things easier for both yourself and your loved one, and just **let it go**.

You'll only be agreeing with yourself

Making agreements does not work! With the damage occurring in the brain, even if your loved one makes an agreement with you, chances are that they will not be able to remember this fact.

Don't forget about nonverbal communication

You set the tone for each day. Be mindful of how your facial expression, tone, and body posture affects every interaction with your loved one. Think of yourself as a mirror – if you are frustrated, your loved one will pick up on that emotion, and is more likely to get frustrated as well.

Be kind to yourself

Remember – you are learning a new language. It is not always going to be easy, but it will be worth it for you and your loved one!

For more information about Memory Moment & Effingham Area Alzheimer's

Awareness, check out their website at www.effinghamalz.org. If you are a caregiver

and have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free

to call Shannon Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.