

Quality Matters

How best to communicate with residents who suffer from dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Behaviours vary significantly from person-to-person. The management and staff of the Australian Aged Care Group Pty Ltd (AACG) believe enhancement of the physical, sensory, cognitive, communication maximisation of participation and quality of life.

There are two (2) key areas in managing resident behaviour where significant difficulties arise:

1. Assessment and the addressing possible underlying causes; and,
2. Staff attitude / approach.

How can our attitude and approach help the resident?

How we present ourselves to a person with dementia is of great importance and may have either a beneficial or negative effect on the resident. The resident is probably struggling with communicating their thoughts and they find it more and more difficult to express themselves clearly and to understand what others may say.

Some changes you might notice include:

- Difficulty in finding a word. A related word might be given instead of one they cannot remember;
- They may speak fluently, but not make sense;
- They may not be able to understand what you are saying or only be able to grasp part of it;
- Writing and reading skills may also deteriorate;
- They may lose the normal social conventions of conversations and interrupt or ignore a speaker, or fail to respond when spoken to;
- They may have difficulty expressing emotions appropriately. fn. (1)

What to try:

Caring attitude

People retain their feelings and emotions even though they may not understand what is being said, so it is important to always maintain their dignity and self-esteem. Be flexible and always allow plenty of time for a response. Where appropriate, use touch to keep the person's attention and to communicate feelings of warmth and affection.

Ways of talking

- Remain calm and talk in a gentle, matter of fact way;
- Keep sentences short and simple, focusing on one idea at a time;
- Always allow plenty of time for what you have said to be understood;
- It can be helpful to use orienting names whenever you can, such as 'Your son Jack'.

Body language

You may need to use hand gestures and facial expressions to make yourself understood. Pointing or demonstrating can help. Touching and holding their hand may help keep their attention and show that you care. A warm smile and shared laughter can often communicate more than words can.

The right environment

- Try to avoid competing noises such as TV or radio;
- If you stay still while talking you will be easier to follow, especially if you stay in the person's line of vision;
- Maintain regular routines to help minimise confusion and assist communication;
- It is much less confusing if everyone uses the same approach. Repeating the message in exactly the same way is important for all the family and all carers. fn. (2)

10 Tips for Best Communication with People who have Dementia:

1. Always approach the person from the front. This allows the person with dementia to make use of all their senses.
2. Position yourself at their eye level. By this gesture you indirectly show the person respect.
3. Wait until the person looks up before talking. This allows the person the time needed to tune into you and to be ready to receive information from you.
4. Lean towards the person when communicating. This builds trust and shows the person you are 100% there for them.
5. Listen for the feelings and the needs behind the words. The person with dementia communicates at a deeper, symbolic and emotional level.
6. Ask Who? What? Where? When? How? Questions. These are all questions which help to validate the person's experiences and thoughts.
7. Never ask Why? This question is too abstract and will often make the person anxious, agitated maybe even angry.



8. Avoid words such as: Should, Must, Ought to, Don't and No. These words all belong to the language of the 'parent' talking down to the 'child' and will most likely create an angry, aggressive outburst.
9. Never ask: Do you remember? It is amazing how much the person with dementia forgets when we ask do you remember?
10. Repeat their key word if you don't understand. Simply repeat the key word with an upward, questioning inflection.



Remember that it is in the pause, in the silence, that the 'magic' happens. Therefore, allow the person with dementia extra time to communicate. fn. (3)

We need to always keep in mind from an ethical point of view, to respect the resident's dignity and enable choice to the resident if possible, e.g. a family member who knows them well and is able to make the choice for them if the need arises. The "difficult behaviours" sometimes associated with dementia can mean many things to different people. For some nurses and carers it may mean difficulty in getting a resident to have a shower at a given time in the morning. However, one must consider that this also could be seen as the resident exercising his/her right to choose.

Footnotes:

1. Alzheimer's Australia July 2005 Help Sheet.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Unknown author.
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