COMMUNICATION

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION DURING ALL STAGES OF ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE

Pam M., living with Alzheimer’s, and her husband and care partner, Bob L.
COMMUNICATION IS:

» How we express our needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge and feelings.

» A combination of attitude, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language.

» An important part of our relationships because it’s how we relate to one another.

» More about listening than talking.

COMMUNICATION AND DEMENTIA

The communication skills of a person with Alzheimer’s or another dementia will gradually decline as the disease progresses. Eventually, he or she will have more difficulty expressing thoughts and emotions.

Challenges associated with communication can lead to frustration. However, by understanding what changes may occur, you can prepare, make adjustments and know how to respond, helping to improve communication.
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1. CHANGES IN COMMUNICATION

For individuals living with Alzheimer’s, changes in communication vary and are based on the person and how far along he or she has progressed in the disease. Issues you can expect to see throughout the disease progression include:

» Difficulty finding the right words.
» Using familiar words repeatedly.
» Describing familiar objects rather than calling them by name.
» Easily losing a train of thought.
» Difficulty organizing words logically.
» Reverting to speaking a native language.
» Speaking less often.
» Relying on gestures more than speaking.

2. COMMUNICATION IN THE EARLY STAGE

In the early stage of Alzheimer’s disease, which is sometimes referred to as mild Alzheimer’s in a medical context, an individual is still able to participate in meaningful conversation and engage in social activities. However, he or she may repeat stories, feel overwhelmed by excessive stimulation or have difficulty finding the right word.

Tips for successful communication:

» Don’t make assumptions about a person’s ability to communicate because of an Alzheimer’s diagnosis. The disease affects each person differently.
» Don’t exclude the person with the disease from conversations.
» Speak directly to the person rather than to his or her caregiver or companion.

» Take time to listen to the person express his or her thoughts, feelings and needs.

» Give the person time to respond. Don’t interrupt unless help is requested.

» Ask what the person is still comfortable doing and what he or she may need help with.

» Discuss which method of communication is most comfortable. This could include face-to-face conversation, email or phone calls.

» It’s OK to laugh. Sometimes humor lightens the mood and makes communication easier.

» Don’t pull away; your honesty, friendship and support are important to the person.
The middle stage of Alzheimer’s, sometimes referred to as moderate Alzheimer’s, is typically the longest and can last for many years. As the disease progresses, the person will have greater difficulty communicating and require more direct care.

**Tips for successful communication:**

» Engage the person in one-on-one conversation in a quiet space with minimal distractions.

» Speak slowly and clearly.

» Maintain eye contact. It shows you care about what he or she is saying.

» Give the person plenty of time to respond so he or she can think about what to say.

» Be patient and offer reassurance. It may encourage the person to explain his or her thoughts.

» Ask one question at a time.

» Ask yes or no questions. For example, “Would you like some coffee?” rather than “What would you like to drink?”

» Avoid criticizing or correcting. Instead, listen and try to find the meaning in what the person says. Repeat what was said to clarify.

» Avoid arguing. If the person says something you don’t agree with, let it be.

» Offer clear, step-by-step instructions for tasks. Lengthy requests may be overwhelming.

» Give visual cues. Demonstrate a task to encourage participation.

» Written notes can be helpful when spoken words seem confusing.
COMMUNICATION IN THE LATE STAGE

The late stage of Alzheimer’s disease, sometimes referred to as severe Alzheimer’s, may last from several weeks to several years. As the disease advances, the person with Alzheimer’s may rely on nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions or vocal sounds. Around-the-clock care is usually required in this stage.

Tips for successful communication:

» Approach the person from the front and identify yourself.

» Encourage nonverbal communication. If you don’t understand what the person is trying to say, ask him or her to point or gesture.

» Use touch, sights, sounds, smells and tastes as a form of communication with the person.

» Consider the feelings behind words or sounds. Sometimes the emotions being expressed are more important than what’s being said.

» Treat the person with dignity and respect. Avoid talking down to the person or as if he or she isn’t there.

» It’s OK if you don’t know what to say; your presence and friendship are most important.

FIND MORE COMMUNICATION TIPS
Visit alz.org/commtips.
The Alzheimer’s Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer’s care, support and research. Our mission is to eliminate Alzheimer’s disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health.

Our vision is a world without Alzheimer’s disease®.

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effective communication strategies

Program goals

By the end of today’s program, you will be able to:

 Explain the communication changes that take place throughout the course of the disease.

 Decode the verbal and behavioral messages delivered by someone with dementia and respond in ways that are helpful to the person.

 Identify strategies to connect and communicate at each stage of the disease.

What is communication?

- Connecting with others
- Sender and message
- Nonverbal communication
- Tone of voice
- Body language
- Listening
- Interaction
- Making decisions
- Relationships
- Communication
Communication changes throughout the disease

Early stage (Mild)
- Convey thoughts and feelings through language.
- Able to make decisions about future care.
- May misinterpret what others say.

Middle stage (Moderate)
- Use basic words and sentences.
- Rely more on tone of voice, facial expression and body language.
- Continue to need emotional connection and meaningful activity.

Late stage (Severe)
- May still respond to familiar words, phrases or songs.
- Use body language and the five senses to connect.

Communication in the early stage

Changes you may notice include:
- Difficulty finding the right words.
- Taking longer to speak or respond.
- Withdrawing from conversations.
- Struggling with decision-making or problem-solving.

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Communication in the early stage

To connect:
- Ask directly how to help with communication.
- Keep sentences clear and straightforward.
- Leave plenty of time for conversations.
- Include the person in conversations that affect him or her, including planning for the future.

Communication in the early stage

Keep in mind:
- Avoid making assumptions.
- Speak directly to the person.
- Communicate in the way that is most comfortable for the person. Options include phone, email, and in person.
- Laugh together.
- Be honest, laugh together, and stay connected with each other.

Communication in the middle stage

Changes you may notice include:
- Increased difficulty finding the right words.
- Using familiar words repeatedly.
- Inventing new words to describe familiar things.
- Easily losing train of thought.
- Speaking less frequently.
- Communicating through behavior rather than words more often.

Consult a doctor when you notice major or sudden changes.
Beverly is a caregiver support group facilitator whose husband has Alzheimer’s disease.

To connect, approach the person gently
- Approach from the front, say who you are and call the person by name.
- Maintain eye contact and get at eye level if seated or reclining.
- Avoid criticizing, correcting and arguing.
- Pay attention to your tone.
- Take your time.

Communication in the middle stage

Rebecca’s mother had Alzheimer’s disease.
Communication in the middle stage

To connect, join the person’s reality
Keep respect and empathy in your mind, then:
- Assess the person’s needs.
- Let the person know you hear his or her concerns, whether they are expressed through words, behavior or both.
- Provide a brief answer.
- Respond to the emotions behind the statement.

Communication in the middle stage

To connect, keep it slow and basic
- Use short sentences and basic words.
- Speak slowly and clearly, one person and one question at a time.
- Limit distractions.
- Be patient.
- Offer a guess or fill in words if acceptable.

Communication in the middle stage

To connect, give multiple cues
- Provide visual cues and gestures.
- Avoid sudden movement.
- Write things down for the person.
- Put answers into your questions.
- Repeat as needed.
- Turn negatives into positives.
- Avoid quizzing.
Communication in the middle stage

To connect, respond empathically and reassure

- Join the person's reality.
- Provide reassurance that you hear and understand.
- Focus on the feelings, not the facts.
- Validate and redirect the person if necessary.

Communication in the late stage

Changes you may notice include:

- Communication is reduced to a few words or sounds.
- Possible responses to familiar words or phrases.

To connect:

- Listen for expressions of pain and respond promptly.
- Help the person feel safe and happy.
- Continue to bring respect to each conversation.
- Keep talking.
- Use all five senses to communicate.
Communication in the late stage

Connect through touch
- Feel different fabrics.
- Identify shapes by touch.
- Give lotion hand massages.
- Identify everyday items in a bag by touch.
- Visit with animals.
- Sculpt using non-toxic materials.
- Hold the person's hand or stroke his or her arm or back.

Communication in the late stage

Connect through sight
- Laminate brightly colored pictures to look at together.
- Watch videos of animals, nature or travel.
- Look at photo albums together.
- View photos of famous paintings, favorite settings or prominent people from the past.
- Go bird-watching or visit an aquarium.
- Paint with watercolors.
- Go outdoors or sit by an open window together.

Communication in the late stage

Connect through sound
- Listen to familiar music.
- Listen to recordings of the sounds of nature, farms, cities or animals.
- Identify musical instruments by sound.
- Listen to songs or speech in the person's native language.
- Read books, poetry, scripture, or newspaper articles to the person.
- Let the person hear the gentle tone of your voice.
### Communication in the late stage

**Connect through smell**
- Make small plastic bags containing items for the person to smell, such as:
  - Herbs or spices.
  - Cotton balls dipped in essential oils.
  - Grass clippings or fragrant flowers.
  - Teas or coffee beans.
- Use fragrant lotions for hand massages
- Cook or feed the person foods that smell good, such as apple pie or chicken soup.

### Communication in the late stage

**Connect through taste**
- Favorite foods.
- Home-baked goodies.
- Popsicles.
- Flavored drinks.
- Ice creams and puddings.

### Communication in all stages of the disease
- Join the person’s reality to connect.
- Understand and accept what you can and cannot change.
- Remember that the person retains a sense of self despite the losses of the disease.
- Demonstrate respect and connect through feelings.
- Always treat the person as the adult he or she is.
- Try to decode the person’s communications.
- Recognize the effects of your mood and actions.
- Try to understand the source of reactions.
- Help meet the needs while soothing and calming the person.
Sam Fazio, Ph.D., is the Director of Special Projects for the National Office of the Alzheimer’s Association.

Contact us – we can help

- Alzheimer’s Navigator
- Community Resource Finder
- ALZConnected
- Alzheimer’s and Dementia Caregiver Center
- Safety Center

- Support groups, education programs and more available in communities nationwide

800.272.3900

- 24/7 Helpline – Available all day every day

Free online education programs available at training.alz.org

Get involved

- Volunteer
- Advocate
- Walk to End Alzheimer’s
- The Longest Day