



Massachusetts Department of
Developmental Services (DDS)



Massachusetts Councils
on Aging (MCOA)



Center for Developmental Disabilities
Evaluation and Research

ACTION ON COMMUNICATION

As dementia progresses, verbal communication can be more challenging. The relationship that you've formed will help support your communication, even as it becomes more difficult. Communicating is more than talking and listening. It involves attitude, tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language and awareness of a person's internal and external environments. The following suggestions should help you to interact more effectively as you support the individual you care for.



Non verbal Communication:

Body Language, Tone, and Environment

- Be sensitive to the environment and minimize distractions when providing care, comfort, or socialization.
- Always approach the individual from the front, establish eye contact, and smile.
- Be certain that the individual is awake and alert, and make sure you have their attention before touching them, so as not to startle them, and before initiating a conversation, especially when you're making requests or giving directions.
- Speak slowly in a gentle even tone. Your tone of voice and body language should make you appear relaxed and calm. An individual with dementia will mirror your behavior, so avoid appearing agitated or upset.
- Wait for responses and be patient.
- Give non-verbal cues such as pointing, touching, gesturing, or beginning the task for the individual.

Verbal Communication:

Words and How You Say Them

- Identify yourself and use the individual's preferred name when addressing them.
- Use short sentences using the object name and what to do with it including noun and verb. Avoid pronouns, such as she, he or them. Use names instead.
- Use the individual's names for familiar items, places, and people.
- Break down tasks into small steps, introducing each step one at a time, possibly even one word at a time.
- Use non-verbal cues (along with words).
- Make sure you allow enough time for a response after each step.
- Minimize or avoid asking questions.
- When you must ask, simplify the choices, ask only one question at a time.
- Strive for questions with simple yes/no answers.
- Whenever possible, turn the question into a positive directive. For example, instead of saying, "Do you want some dinner?" say, "Let's go eat dinner now."
- Turn negative statements into positive statements. Instead of saying "Don't do that", say "Let's do this".

- Avoid confrontation, corrections, and arguments. Listen closely and respond to the feelings or emotions behind the message.
- The individual with dementia cannot remember what was just said or the answer that you just gave, so be prepared to repeat yourself.

Remember:

- Although the individual forgets things, their feelings and emotions remain intact.
- Never insult, belittle, embarrass, or frighten them. Avoid harsh words that may feel frightening or threatening.
- Choose your words and tone carefully so that you don't do this even unintentionally.
- Use warmth and humor in your interactions, and show genuine caring and respect for the individual.
- Be aware of body language and facial expression. Create a tone that is positive, friendly, and safe.