



## Tool Box Topic – Ten Tips for Communicating with a Person living with Dementia

Caring for a client with dementia poses many challenges for caregivers. People with dementia from conditions such as Alzheimer’s and related diseases have a progressive *brain* disorder that makes it more and more difficult for them to remember things, think clearly, communicate with others, or take care of themselves. In addition, dementia can cause mood swings and even affect a person’s personality and behavior. This Fact Sheet provides some practical strategies for addressing the challenging behaviors and communication difficulties often encountered when caring for a person with dementia.

We aren’t born knowing how to communicate with a person with dementia—but we can learn. Good communication skills will also enhance your ability to handle the difficult behavior(s) you may encounter as you care for a person living with a dementing illness.

**1. Set a positive mood for interaction.** Your attitude and body language communicate your feelings and thoughts stronger than your words. Set a positive mood by speaking to your client in a pleasant and respectful manner. Use facial expressions, tone of voice and touch to help convey your message and show your feelings of affection and caring.

**2. Get the person’s attention.** Limit distractions and noise—turn off the radio or TV, close the curtains or shut the door, or move to quieter surroundings. Before speaking, make sure you have his or her attention; address the client by name, identify yourself by name and relation, and use nonverbal cues and touch to help keep the client focused.

**3. State your message clearly.** Use simple words and sentences. Speak slowly, distinctly and in a reassuring tone. Refrain from raising your voice higher or louder; instead, pitch your voice lower. If the client doesn’t understand the first time, use the same wording to repeat your message or question. If she still doesn’t understand, wait a few minutes and rephrase the question. Use the names of people and places instead of pronouns or abbreviations.

**4. Ask simple, answerable questions.** Ask one question at a time; those with yes or no answers work best. Refrain from asking open-ended questions or giving too many choices. For example, ask, “*Would you like to wear your white shirt or your blue shirt?*” Better still, show her the choices—visual prompts and cues also help clarify your question and can guide her response.

**5. Listen with your ears, eyes and heart.** Be patient in waiting for a reply. Watch for nonverbal cues and body language, and respond appropriately. *Always strive to listen for the meaning and feelings that underlie the words.*

**6. Break down activities into a series of steps.** This makes many tasks much more manageable. You can encourage the client to do what they can, gently reminding them of steps they tend to forget, and assist with steps the client is no longer able to accomplish on their own. Using visual


cues, such as showing them with your hand where to place the dinner plate, can be very helpful.

**7. When the going gets tough, distract and redirect.** If the client becomes upset, try changing the subject or the environment. For example, ask them for help or suggest going for a walk. *It is important to connect with the person on a feeling level, before you redirect.* You might say, *“I see you’re feeling sad—I’m sorry you’re upset. Let’s go get something to eat.”*

**8. Respond with affection and reassurance.** People with dementia often feel confused, anxious and unsure of themselves. Further, they often get reality confused and may recall things that never really occurred. *Avoid trying to convince them they are wrong.* Stay focused on the feelings they are demonstrating (which are real) and respond with verbal and physical expressions of comfort, support and reassurance.

**9. Remember the good old days.** Remembering the past is often a soothing and affirming activity. Many people with dementia may not remember what happened 45 minutes ago, but they can clearly recall their lives 45 years earlier. Therefore, *avoid asking questions that rely on short-term memory*, such as asking the person what they had for lunch. Instead, try asking general questions about the person’s distant past—this information is more likely to be retained.

**10. Maintain your sense of humor.** *Use humor whenever possible, though not at the person’s expense.* People with dementia tend to retain their social skills and are usually delighted to laugh along with you.

 Our specialized dementia care program gives caregivers the skills they need to be successful while assisting a client living with a memory impairing illness. We have packaged a module on [Homewatch CareGivers University](#) that supports training that will empower caregivers to foster independence at the abilities of their clients.

HWCG Dementia Care Training module includes these 4 courses. The courses can be enrolled in as a package using item number P5835 or separately by using the item numbers to the left of the title.

- P1201 Alzheimer’s disease and Related disorders (ADRD)
- P1088 Staying Busy with Activities
- P1145 Music and Art Interventions
- P1128 Helping Family and Friends