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## Communicating With Persons With Dementia

### *Identifying Key Steps Toward Improved Communication*

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Losing the ability to put into words what one is thinking or wanting to say can be devastating to both the person with memory loss and to relatives and friends who are trying to maintain a close relationship.

It becomes essential that a close and loving relationship be maintained by sharing relaxed and happy experiences, even though this is often difficult to achieve when families are so disturbed by what the disease has done to someone special in their lives. Some of the following suggestions, such as a lighthearted approach, may seem impossible when relatives face the devastation of the loss of the "person" they knew. And yet, many of these efforts help the person with memory loss to express and exhibit glimpses of his/her former self.

Following are suggestions for communicating and maintaining a warm relationship with a person with memory loss:

Ö *Talk in a lighthearted, warm, and easy way.* This lets your loved one know you are happy to be with him/her and that you enjoy sharing time together.

Ö *Use diversional ways to draw your loved one's attention and help him/her get pleasure from your visit.* If there are small children in the family, their visits can be very appealing to a person with memory



loss and can draw attention away from problems. If your loved one has always been an animal lover, well-trained pets can also be very engaging and distracting. These diversions give visitors something to talk about and frequently enable persons with memory loss to comment on, or at least share in, the pleasures of their visitors.

Ö *Share simple repetitive tasks like stuffing envelopes, shelling peas, or folding towels, that can enable your loved one to have a good and productive time.* This allows the person to be involved and the family member or friend to chat about what they are accomplishing and how much fun it is working together. Such an activity can be introduced by saying, "I really feel swamped today. Would you be willing to help me with this job? You have always been so good at things like this."

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## Keys to Communication

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Ö *Not everyone likes to be hugged and kissed, but for those who do, it is important that these expressions of love and affection be continued when relatives or friends visit.* When a person with memory loss is immediately met with a hug, a kiss, or a chuckle when a visitor arrives, a feeling of warmth and pleasure is created. It is one of the warmest ways of communicating.

Ö *Photo albums can be effective tools to help a person remember parts of the past and enable a visiting friend or relative to communicate with the person.* If your loved one can no longer put faces and names together, a family member can help by pointing to a photo and giving the name and relationship. For example, "This is a nice photo of Mary, isn't it?" She's your oldest granddaughter and from a snapshot I have of you, I think she looks a lot like you did at that age. She's good looking, too!"

Ö *A lighthearted and relaxed reaction can often reduce tension and help the person to forget, at least for the moment, the difficulties he/she is having.* Many people with memory loss seem to be very much

aware of what the disease is doing to them. They can become frustrated and angry when they try to express themselves and are not understood. It is often helpful if family members let their loved one know that they are equally concerned and want to do everything they can to help. Asking questions to try to understand what the person is saying seldom helps. A diversional approach is usually less stressful. A visiting daughter might say, "I know you are angry, Mother, about what has happened to you. And I get so very upset, too, but let's have some fun today. Let's each have one of our favorite chocolate sundaes." This approach is not always successful, but a lighthearted and relaxed reaction can often reduce tension and help the person to forget, at least for the moment, the difficulties he/she is having.

Overall, one of the primary goals of good communication with people with memory loss is to help them realize that they are still loved and are an essential part of the lives of family and friends who have been close to them in the past.

## Resources

Brochure - "Steps to Enhancing Communication: Interacting with Persons With Alzheimer's Disease," Alzheimer's Association, 1997

Book - "The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Care," Virginia Bell & David Troxel, 1997

Book - "Alzheimer's Early Stages" Daniel Kuhn, MSW, 1999

Video - "Dealing with Alzheimer's - A Common Sense Approach to Communication" (Available at the South Central Michigan Chapter Lending Library)

Video - "Caregiver Kit: Communication" Alzheimer's Association (Available at all chapter Lending Library locations)



*To obtain these and other resources, contact the chapter office at 734.677.3081 or 800.337.3827.*