

Alzheimer's Disease: Communication Strategies

2.0 Contact Hours

Presented by:

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Alzheimer's Disease: Communication Strategies

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Objectives:

At the completion of this course, the learner will be able to:

1. Define communication and articulate why it is important when caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease.
2. Describe how Alzheimer's disease affects an individual's ability to communicate.
3. List at least five methods for helping a person with Alzheimer's communicate.
4. Name at least seven strategies for helping individuals with Alzheimer's disease understand what is being communicated to them.
5. Explain how to accommodate for hearing and vision changes when communicating with a person with Alzheimer's disease.

Introduction

Often taken for granted, communication is what connects us to each other.

Communication is important to family, work, and community relationships, allows people to accomplish goals, and cultivates a sense of self-worth. Unfortunately, Alzheimer's disease creates barriers to effective communication that can strain relationships between individuals with Alzheimer's and their family members, neighbors, and health care professionals who care for them.

Among nurses and other care providers, effective communication is critical to assessing the emotional and physical needs of individuals with Alzheimer's, developing appropriate treatment plans, and implementing care strategies that bolster patient compliance. This course will help health care professionals understand the meaning and

value of communication and recognize the communication changes that occur among those with Alzheimer's. This course is also designed to increase professionals' repertoire of communication strategies when listening to those with Alzheimer's, speaking to patients with the disease, and interacting with Alzheimer's patients who have hearing and/or vision impairments.

What is Communication?

Before learning how to better communicate with a person with Alzheimer's disease, it is important to understand the meaning and value of communication.

Communication can facilitate:

- An exchange of information
- A sharing of ideas
- An expression of emotions
- The sending of messages to others
- The receiving of messages from others
- A verbal or non-verbal way of relating to another person
- An articulation of who one is as a human being
- A reflection of feelings and thoughts through words, attitude, facial expressions, tone of voice, and/or body language

If this expansive definition seems daunting, it is helpful to think of communication as a two-way process (sending and receiving messages) which can occur in two modes (verbal and non-verbal):

	Verbal	Non-Verbal
Sending Messages	Talking to the person with Alzheimer's	Using facial expressions, body language, etc. when interacting with the person with Alzheimer's
Receiving Messages	Listening to the person with Alzheimer's	Observing the person's facial expressions, body language, etc.

Each method and mode of communication is important when providing health care services to individuals with Alzheimer's. For instance, informing patients about medical or personal care activities taking place helps reduce anxiety. Projecting a calm, non-threatening attitude through body language and facial expressions assures those with Alzheimer's that they are receiving proper, compassionate care. Deciphering what the patient is saying can guide treatment and personal care plans, while observing the person's non-verbal behavior can provide clues about whether the individual is experiencing any pain or discomfort. In order to effectively send and receive messages with a person with Alzheimer's, it is necessary to understand how the disease changes a person's ability to communicate over time.

How Does Alzheimer's Affect a Person's Ability to Communicate?

Although each person with Alzheimer's is unique, the disease creates distinct challenges in regard to how those with Alzheimer's express themselves to others and how they understand what is being communicated to them. Those who work with Alzheimer's individuals will recognize at least some of the following changes:

- Difficulty finding the correct words

- Creating new words for ones that are forgotten
- Repeating or overusing a word or phrase
- Trouble organizing words into logical sentences
- Cursing or using other offensive language
- Diminished speech (often accompanied by an increase in non-verbal gestures)
- For those who are bilingual, reverting back to the use of a native language

These changes develop gradually as the disease progresses. If drastic changes in communication occur suddenly, they are more likely due to another medical condition; in these cases, the individual's physician should be notified immediately.

In addition to these general changes, the person with Alzheimer's loses particular communication abilities during the early, middle, and late stages of the disease. These changes are summarized below, according to stage.

Early Stage

- Incapacity to understand rapid speech, complex material, sarcasm, and innuendo
- Difficulty understanding speech amidst noise or other distractions
- Trouble staying on topic or thinking of topics to discuss
- Slower processing of language
- More hesitancy in responding
- Increased use of word substitution, but can still self-correct
- Increased anger or argumentativeness
- Inability to make smooth conversational transitions; speech may sound blunt or possibly rude
- Decreased attention span

Middle Stage

- Incapacity to understand prolonged conversation
- Inability to understand speech in loud or distracting environments
- Mechanics of reading are intact, but can no longer understand what is read
- Decreased ability to interpret facial expressions
- Inability to name abstract concepts
- More frequent use of pauses and sentence fragments
- Inability to self-correct
- Diminished vocal expression and ability to raise or lower voice
- Reduced ability to finish sentences
- Increased egocentrism due to lost ability to see another's point of view
- Less apparent interest in communicating (e.g., fewer conversations initiated by the person with Alzheimer's, less eye contact, fewer questions)

Late Stage

- Incapacity to understand the meaning of most words
- Decreased awareness (i.e., inability to realize when being spoken to)
- Diminished use of grammar; increased use of jargon
- Apparent loss of interest in communicating
- In some cases, the person may become mute

Although a person with Alzheimer's – especially in the late stage of the disease – may appear uninterested in communicating, it could be that the disease has simply made the individual incapable of showing a desire to communicate. This is why it is crucial to always strive for meaningful communication with a person with Alzheimer's. The

appearance of apathy is not necessarily true apathy. The strategies described in the following sections are designed to enhance communication with individuals with Alzheimer's at all stages of the disease.

How to Help the Person with Alzheimer's Communicate

A critical part of communication with an individual with Alzheimer's is being an excellent listener. However, the role of listener is more active when communicating with someone with Alzheimer's because the person may need encouragement and assistance with expressing his or her thoughts. Here are some guidelines for helping an individual with Alzheimer's disease communicate:

- *Show patience.* Alzheimer's individuals can sense when a person is impatient or agitated, and this only increases their own frustration. Be patient when the person is trying to communicate something, and assure the person that you are interested in what he or she is trying to say. Maintaining eye contact and smiling are wonderful ways to show patience and support.
- *Provide reassurance.* If the person with Alzheimer's is having trouble communicating something to you, convey to him or her that it is all right, and encourage the person to continue to try to put his or her thoughts into words. Repress the urge to interrupt, especially if the person appears to be on the verge of finding the right words.
- *Focus on the positive.* Because of the way that Alzheimer's disease affects the brain, criticizing, scolding, or correcting the person is nonproductive and may be harmful. Instead, focus on what the person has said and try to find constructive

meaning in his or her message. Feel free to repeat what was said in order to clarify the person's intended meaning.

- *Agree instead of argue.* Alzheimer's disease has robbed the person's ability to use reason or logic. Because reason and logic are necessary for two people to engage in an argument, arguing with a person with Alzheimer's is futile. If you do not agree with – or are offended by – a statement made by the person, just let it go.
- *Offer alternatives.* If the person is really having difficulty finding the right words to express his or her thoughts, it is okay to offer a guess as long as it is not an interruption and the person appears to want some assistance. Asking the person to point or gesture as a way of communicating may also help. On the other hand, if you know what the person is trying to communicate, even though the wrong word was used, guessing the right word might be unnecessary.
- *Concentrate on what the person is feeling.* Although the content of the person's message may be hard to understand, it is often possible to uncover what the person with Alzheimer's is feeling by observing tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body language. Often, what the person is feeling is enough information to formulate an appropriate response.
- *Reduce distractions.* Because it is harder for individuals with Alzheimer's to communicate in chaotic environments, try to talk with the person in a quiet, calm area; this will be better for both of you.

How to Speak and Communicate Effectively to the Person with Alzheimer's

While being a good listener is vital to enhancing communication with individuals with Alzheimer's, it is also imperative to effectively convey your ideas and information to the person with the disease. Regardless of how difficult communication becomes, people at all stages of the disease benefit – and have the right to – sensitive and frequent communication from those who care for them. There are several strategies for effectively speaking and communicating to a person with Alzheimer's:

- *Set yourself up for success.* Approaching a person with Alzheimer's from the front will eliminate the possibility of startling the person and getting off to a rocky start. Identify yourself and address the person by his or her name.
- *Be aware of tone and body language.* Speaking clearly, slowly, and in a relaxed tone of voice will put the person with Alzheimer's at ease. Maintaining eye contact and using friendly gestures will also set the stage for a positive interaction. If you are calm and compassionate, the person will sense this and respond accordingly; conversely, if you are demanding or anxious, the person will respond to a negative emotional state as well.
- *Keep it simple.* Using difficult words or long sentences may overwhelm the person with Alzheimer's. Instead, choose short, simple words and phrases that are familiar to the person. If you are providing directions (e.g., for the person to take medication or perform a personal care routine), break tasks down into easy, straightforward steps that are given one at a time. Similarly, only ask the person one question at a time instead of a series of questions that might be daunting.

- *Wait for a response.* It might take longer for a person with Alzheimer's to respond to your statement, question, or request. Be patient and give the person some time to respond. If the person does not react, try repeating your statement the same way you worded it the first time. If you asked the person a question, try converting it into an answer. For example, instead of asking, "Do you need a drink of water?" say, "Here's a glass of water."
- *Be clear.* Avoid the use of phrases that can be interpreted literally, such as "break a leg" or "chew the fat" – phrases like these might confuse a person with Alzheimer's disease. Also avoid pronouns and use the actual noun instead. For example, instead of saying, "Put this on," try saying, "Put your coat on."
- *Focus on the key word or idea.* Place an emphasis on the most important word in your message through your voice or by providing a visual prompt (e.g., say "Here is the *bathroom*" or point to the bathroom door).
- *Never scold or interrogate.* Instead of telling a person with Alzheimer's not to do something, give the person an alternative. For example, instead of saying, "Don't touch that vase," try redirecting them by saying, "Can you hold this book for me?" Similarly, resist the urge to test the person's knowledge or memory with lots of questions. Instead of pressuring the person by saying, "You know who that is, don't you?" say, "Look, it's your sister Millie!"
- *Try another strategy.* If you are having difficulty communicating your message to the person, try using another strategy to reach the individual. If the person can still read, try writing down your message if verbal communication is not working. If

what you are trying to communicate is not urgent, wait awhile and try again later when the person is more receptive.

- *Communicate with dignity.* Above all, treat the person with Alzheimer's with respect and dignity. Although the person's abilities have been affected by the disease, the individual is still an adult – talking down to the person will only make things worse. Additionally, never talk about people with Alzheimer's in front of them as if they were not in the room.

Hearing and Vision Changes

Although most communication changes among people with Alzheimer's are due to the way the disease affects the brain, many individuals with Alzheimer's experience concomitant hearing and/or vision problems that exacerbate communication difficulties. All Alzheimer's patients should be evaluated for hearing and vision problems, and any impairment should be incorporated into care plans and procedures. Below are some tips for working with individuals with Alzheimer's who have accompanying hearing or vision problems.

Tips for Communicating with the Hearing Impaired

- Always approach the person from the front, and stay standing or sitting in front of the person throughout the communication.
- If the person does not see you approach, say the person's name and provide a light touch on the arm to alert the person of your presence.
- Do not shout; instead, speak slowly, distinctly, and in a low tone of voice.

- Try using non-verbal communication (e.g., pointing) or writing down your message.
- Make sure that the person is wearing a working hearing aid, if prescribed.

Tips for Communicating with the Visually Impaired

- As with the hearing impaired, approach the person from the front, and be sure the person is aware of your presence to avoid startling the individual.
- Use any audiovisual materials or equipment that might enhance the person's ability to understand you.
- Explain why you are there before providing any personal care.
- Avoid making any sudden movements or loud noises, which may frighten the person.
- Make sure that the person is wearing clean glasses, if prescribed.

Conclusion

Alzheimer's disease affects communication by impairing a person's ability to express him or herself as well as impeding the person's capacity to understand what is being conveyed to them. Because effective communication is central to providing quality health care, Alzheimer's disease creates challenging barriers to achieving optimal service provision. This course covered the nature of communication and why it is important, the ways that Alzheimer's disease affects communication, how health care professionals can help Alzheimer's individuals express themselves, how professionals can best speak and communicate to their patients with Alzheimer's, and the special considerations relating to people with Alzheimer's who also have hearing and/or vision impairments. Supplying

health care professionals with communication strategies will better prepare them to effectively interact with individuals affected by Alzheimer's and, ultimately, will enhance the services provided to this population.

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