

DEMENTIA & COMMUNICATION

Dementia affects how a person expresses themselves and makes their wants and needs known. Dementia causes progressive damage to specific areas of the brain responsible for language, processing, and cognitive functions. Dementia leads to the death of brain cells and shrinking of the brain.

A person with dementia will not always be able to communicate their needs and wants. **Our job is to decipher nonverbal messages to determine what they truly want and need.**

Tips for Non-verbal Communication

- **Use physical contact to communicate your interest and to provide reassurance.** Ex: holding someone's hand or an arm around someone's shoulder (if/when appropriate).
- **Respect personal space and try to sit or stand at eye level.**
- People with dementia can read and interpret body language. **Sudden movements, a stern tone of voice or tense facial expressions may be distressing**, even if the words you say are not.
- **Body language and facial expression should match what is said**, even if it feels forced (ex. it can be useful to smile when talking about pleasant memories).
- **Learn to recognize what is being communicated through body language.** Try to keep the person engaged if they seem distracted or bored.
- **Visual prompts can be very helpful.** Cue cards or a book of meal pictures that someone can point to is an excellent way to communicate what they would like to eat. This may also stimulate their appetite.
- Try other forms of communication - **the person may enjoy drawing or singing to express themselves.**
- Use fewer words — **a person in early-stage dementia usually only understands 1 in 4 words spoken to them.**

Helpful Phrases When Miscommunications Occur

- "I'm sorry, this is hard. I hate this for you."
- "I'm sorry. I was trying to help."
- "I'm sorry I made you angry."
- "I'm sorry; that should NOT have happened."
- "I'm sorry, I had no right to make you feel that way."

