

effective communication strategies



tips for program participants

introduction

Thank you for participating in the Alzheimer's Association's *Effective Communication Strategies* program. This brochure is designed to accompany the program and to provide you with a reference to take with you and use in the future.

The program and this Tips brochure are organized by stage. In each section, you will find a list of changes you may notice, followed by ideas for how to connect with the person in that stage. There is also space for notes.

We hope that you find this brochure helpful as you accompany the person with dementia through the stages, allowing you communicate and connect with each other more effectively and meaningfully.

table of contents

Introduction	page 2
Early stage	page 3
Middle stage	page 4
Late stage	page 7
Communication in all stages of the disease	page 10
Resources	page 11

Early Stage

Changes you may notice include:

- Difficulty finding the right words.
- Taking longer to speak or respond.
- Withdrawing from conversations.
- Struggling with decision-making or problem-solving.

To connect:

- Ask directly how to help with communication.

Instead of thinking:

"He really struggles with words now. I'll keep guessing what he means — that should help."

You could say:

"If you're having trouble coming up with a word, would you like me to suggest a word or would you rather have more time to come up with it on your own?"

- Keep sentences clear and straightforward.
- Leave plenty of time for conversations.
- Include the person in conversations that affect him or her, including planning for the future.
- Don't make assumptions about the person's ability to communicate.

Instead of thinking:

"There's no way she can understand this, so why bring it up?"

Try thinking:

"I really want her to understand why I want to do this. I'll explain it a couple of different ways and if it doesn't work, I'll write it down for her and see if that helps."

- Speak directly to the person.
- Remember to laugh together.
- Be honest and frank about your feelings, and don't pull away.

Instead of thinking:

"I'm sure he knows I still care, no matter what."

You could say:

"This is a change for me, too, but I love you and I'm not going anywhere. We'll deal with it together."

Middle Stage

Changes you may notice include:

- Increased difficulty finding the right words.
- Using familiar words repeatedly.
- Inventing new words to describe familiar things.
- Easily losing train of thought.
- Speaking less frequently.

Note: Be sure to consult a doctor when you notice major or sudden changes.

To connect, approach the person gently.

- Approach from the front, say who you are and call the person by name.

Instead of:

"Hi, Dad! I'm here!"

You could say:

"Hi, Dad, it's your son, Sam!"

- Maintain eye contact and get at eye level if seated or reclining.
- Avoid criticizing, correcting and arguing.

Instead of:

*"No, Grandma, it's not Tuesday, it's Friday. What makes you think it's Tuesday?
I always come over on Fridays."*

You could say:

"Here's the calendar. I'll mark which day it is when I come over."

- Pay attention to your tone.
- Take your time.

To connect, join the person's reality.

Keep respect and empathy in your mind, then:

- Assess the person's needs.
- Let the person know you hear him or her.
- Provide a brief answer.

communication effective strategies

- Respond to the emotions behind the statement.

Instead of:

"Calm down, Aunt Mary. I'm sure your keys are not really lost."

You could say:

"I can hear how upset you are about the keys not being where they usually are. It's so frustrating when that happens! Can I take a look around?"

To connect, keep it slow and basic.

- Use short sentences and uncomplicated words.
- Speak slowly and clearly, one person and one question at a time.
- Limit distractions.
- Be patient.
- Offer a guess or fill in words if acceptable.
- Sometimes, it's helpful to offer the choice you think best at the end of the sentence.

Instead of:

"What would you like for breakfast?"

You could say:

"It's time for breakfast. Would you like eggs or oatmeal?"

To connect, give multiple cues.

- Provide visual cues and gestures.
- Avoid sudden movement.
- Write things down for the person.
- Put answers into your questions.

Instead of:

"Mom, I'm going to the drug store. What do you need?"

You could say:

"Mom, I'm going to the drug store now. Can I pick up more toothpaste and shampoo for you?"

- Repeat as needed.

communication effective strategies

- Turn negatives into positives.

Instead of:

"We go to that same park every day. Can't we do something else?"

You could say:

"Let's try something new today. Let's go watch the kids play in that new playground for a little while."

- Avoid quizzing.

To connect, respond empathically and reassure.

- Join the person's reality.
- Provide reassurance that you hear and understand.
- Focus on the feelings, not the facts.

Instead of:

"You're not alone at all — we come to visit you every day!"

You could say:

"I'm so sorry you feel alone — that's really hard. We visit as much as we can, but maybe you'd like more company. Let's see if there are some groups at the day center that you might be interested in joining."

- Validate and redirect the person if necessary.

Late Stage

Changes you may notice include:

- Communication is reduced to a few basic words or sounds.
- Possible responses to familiar words or phrases.

To connect:

- Listen for expressions of pain and respond promptly.
- Help the person feel safe and happy.

Instead of thinking:

"She hasn't had a bath yet today, and I have to leave soon. She hates the bath and she's so crabby today that I really dread this. But she needs to get into that tub now!"

Try thinking:

"She's not in a good mood today and she hates the bath. She just bathed yesterday and she's still pretty clean, so I think it will be ok and may actually go better if we wait until tomorrow."

- Continue to bring respect to each conversation.
- Keep talking.
- Use all five senses to communicate.

Connect through touch.

- Feel different fabrics.

Try:

- Burlap
 - Fake fur
 - Suede
 - Felt or polar fleece
 - Cotton
 - Wool knit
- Identify shapes by touch.
 - Give lotion hand massages.

- Identify everyday items in a bag by touch.

Try:

- *Spoon*
 - *Spool of thread*
 - *Pencil*
 - *Comb*
 - *Child's blunt-tip scissors*
- Visit with animals.
 - Sculpt using non-toxic materials.

Note:

There are commercial non-toxic sculpting products on the market, or you can make one at home. Recipes can be found online or through your local library.

- Hold the person's hand or stroke his or her arm or back.

Connect through sight.

- Laminate brightly colored pictures to look at together.
- Watch videos of baby animals, nature or travel.
- Look at photo albums together.
- View photos of famous paintings, favorite settings or prominent people from the past.
- Go bird-watching or visit an aquarium.
- Paint with watercolors.
- Go outdoors or sit by an open window together.

Connect through sound.

- Listen to familiar music.
- Listen to recordings of the sounds of nature, farms, cities, animals or babies.
- Identify musical instruments by sound.

Note:

Again, there are great free resources available online or through the local library.

- Listen to songs or speech in the person's native language.
- Let the person hear the gentle tone of your voice.

Connect through smell.

- Make small plastic bags containing items for the person to smell, such as:
 - Herbs, spices, teas or coffee beans.
 - Cotton balls dipped in essential oils.
 - Grass clippings, fragrant flowers.
- Use fragrant lotions for hand massages.

Note:

Be sure to only offer these under supervision, as any of these may be dangerous if swallowed.

Connect through taste.

- Favorite foods.
- Home-baked goodies.
- Popsicles.
- Flavored drinks.
- Ice creams and puddings.

Communication in all stages of the disease

In every stage, keep the following communication tips in mind.

- **Respect and empathy are key.**
Remember that the essence of the person continues. Respect the person as the adult he or she is, and adjust your communication based on what is meaningful to the person today, no matter what the stage.
- **Join the person's reality to uncover the source of reactions and to connect.**
Keep in mind that behavior is a form of communication, and by seeing the world through his or her eyes, you can get clues about what the person is responding to. This connection also provides soothing and reassurance for the person with dementia.
- **Understand and accept what you can and cannot change.**
You cannot expect the person with the disease to behave as he or she might have in the past, with a reasonable response. If a communication of yours isn't getting the desired response, focus on what you can change in what you are doing to alter the situation.
- **Focus on feelings, not facts.**
Responding to those feelings first can help avoid resistance.
- **Try to decode the person's communications.**
The emotion behind the words or behavior being expressed are your most powerful tools when attempting to decode communication and connect with the person with dementia.
- **Recognize the effects of your mood and actions.**
We all convey our moods through our actions and tone of voice. People with dementia are sensitive to these feelings and will often pick up and react to those feelings, sometimes causing feelings to escalate.
- **Help meet the needs while soothing and calming the person.**
Provide what you can to meet the person's needs, remembering to help the person feel safe and content .

Resources can help

Throughout all the stages of the disease, the Alzheimer's Association has services and resources to help you and your family.

Get reliable information and resources at [alz.org/care](https://www.alz.org/care)

- **Caregiver Center**

Visit and get information, links and resources.

- **Alzheimer's Navigator**

Create customized portfolio of resources.

- **ALZConnected**

Connect with others via online message boards.

- **Community Resource Finder**

Find local dementia-related resources.

- **E-learning courses**

Learn any time with online education programs.

You can also call our 24/7 Helpline at 800.272.3900

Every day of the year, day or night, a call to the Helpline puts you in touch with dementia-trained professionals ready to provide information, resources and support.

The Alzheimer's Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer's care, support and research. Our mission is to eliminate Alzheimer's disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health.

Our vision is a world without Alzheimer's disease. ®



Alzheimer's Association

National Office

225 N. Michigan Ave., Fl. 17

Chicago, IL 60601-7633

800.272.3900

alz.org®

This program is the property of the Alzheimer's Association and its contents may be used only by its authorized training staff and licensed representatives of the Association for presentations of "*Effective Communication Strategies*". It may not be reproduced or used for any other purpose without the prior written consent of the Alzheimer's Association. © 2014 Alzheimer's Association. All rights reserved.