



# Communicating CARE

BY PAULA GIBSON

A challenge for family caregivers of a person with memory loss is a loved one's inability to communicate. In fact, the inability to understand what's being said or talk properly may be one of the first signs of dementia.

If a loved one doesn't respond to words, it may not be because they can't hear or are electing to not hear you, but that the disease is preventing them from understanding what you're saying or responding in an appropriate manner. Imagine words going in then the

disease taking and scrambling them so what's heard is a completely different message, resulting in an equally scrambled response. The reverse also happens—they hear and understand what's being said, but then the disease scrambles the words so they come out wrong.

When this begins, it's easy to slowly stop communicating—to stop asking about their day or what they want to do—because the response is painful or takes too long to get out. But even

those in the end stages of a disease need interaction, daily communication, and to hear a human voice. Here are a few tips to improve communication.

- Approach a loved one from the front and make eye contact. Let them know you're talking to them and that they're important. This helps them focus and have better responses.
- Speak calmly with short sentences, and ask one question at a time. This

allows your loved one to process things more easily and to not get overwhelmed.

- Wait, listen, and watch. You can tell a lot by watching someone's facial expression. Do they like what you said? Did they laugh? Did their eyes light up? You'll get a response if you're patient and cue into verbal and nonverbal reactions.
- Don't argue with or correct a loved one, and give compliments. One reason communication can stop is a sense of failure. It doesn't matter

if they get something completely right, but that they're talking with you. They need a win more than you do and to be told frequently how wonderful they are. Your job is to help them feel loved and heard.

- Don't talk about them with others while they're present, and ask their opinions. Just because they can't communicate as well as they used to doesn't mean they're not here. Even those in the end stages of a disease can hear what's going on around them. Bring them into conversations of joy, not diagnosis

and plans for their future demise, and ask what they want, even if they can't respond. It's the dignified thing to do. You may be amazed by their nonverbal responses: eye flutters, hand grasps, smiles, and frowns.

- Use their life story to distract and not react. If they ask about a relative who has died, don't get upset that they don't recall the death, but instead help them remember a special time they had with the person.

Everyone has a life story, and it's our job to help loved one's stories continue despite disease barriers. Sing, talk, laugh, cry, hold hands, smile, and keep the lines of communication flowing.

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*Photographs provided by Azura Memory Care.*

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