LEARNING TO SPEAK
“ALZHEIMER’S”
Effective Communication Strategies in Dementia Care

Alzheimer's disease and related dementias/disorders (ADRD) gradually diminish a person's ability to communicate. Communication with a person with Alzheimer's requires patience, understanding and good listening skills.
Communication

Understand that communication skills is one of the first areas affected by Alzheimer’s – not only comprehension but language, as well. A person often has trouble locating words or phrases to communicate her thoughts. She has trouble following a conversation, many times because she can’t recall what was said just a few minutes ago.
IMPORTANT NOTE

EVERY “behavior” is a form of communication!
Strategies for Communicating with Persons with ADRD

• Orientation
• Validation
• Redirection
• Simple sentences/questions
• Memory Cuing
Orientation

• Identify yourself
• Approach the person quietly and slowly from the front and say who you are
• Keep eye contact; if the person is seated or reclined, approach them at eye level
• Call the person by name as this helps to get her attention
• Speak slowly
Validation

• Often a person believes that she is living in a different time or place
• This is HER reality
• “Validate” this whenever possible by entering her reality
• This approach conveys safety in her surroundings
• You will never convince her that what she “believes” is not true
• Ask questions about the time and/or place she thinks she is in
• Don’t feel guilty about “lies”
Redirection

• Don’t contradict a person or argue with her – you will never win an argument with a person with Alzheimer’s!
• Use creative ways to “redirect” the conversation to a topic that she can understand
• Bring up happy memories that you know she will connect with
• Since her short-term memory is impaired, changing the subject gently is often the best course of action to take
Simple sentences/questions

• Always use easy to understand words and short, simple sentences
• Avoid asking several questions at once
• Avoid asking questions that require difficult decision-making
Memory Cuing

• Use words, photographs or music to help cue memories
• Use gestures or prompts to help get her point across
• Place reminder notes for help in completing tasks
  – Color code
  – Number things in the order in which they should be done
• Lay out clothes in the order they should be put on
• Point or touch the item you want her to use
• Begin the task for her and ask for her assistance
Nov-verbal Communication

- Non-verbal behaviors are a primary source of communication.
- Looks, head nods, body positioning and posture, gestures, facial expressions and even breathing contribute to the relationship and communication between caregiver and person with Alzheimer’s.
Tips to improve communication through non-verbal methods

• Limit distractions
• Face the person and be at their eye level
• Use simple gestures
• “Listen” with your eyes
• When she uses non-verbal cues, show that you understand
• If you don’t understand, prompt her gently until you do
• Observe breathing to help predict emotional responses
• Look for permission to touch the person to help soothe her
• Remain calm
Remember:

The person with Alzheimer’s can often understand even the slightest of non-verbal cues on your part. If YOU are frustrated, SHE might become frustrated and exhibit negative emotional or behavioral patterns.
Types of non-verbal communication

• Eye contact
• Touch
• Body Language
Cultural/language differences

• Understand diversity of a person and her family
• Familiarize yourself with a person’s culture and background
• If there is a language barrier, try to learn simple words and phrases in her native language to help communicate with her
• It is important to learn how the person views family and healthcare from the perspective of her ethnicity and culture
• Don’t assume that all people from one country, religion or background have the same cultural principles
• Get to know the person through her family, if possible
• Diversity also applies to sexual orientation
• Above all else, be respectful of the person and her diversities
Strategies for Communicating with Families

• Reframing is changing the way people see things and coming up with alternative and creative ways of viewing a situation.
  – Provide education about the disease and what to expect
  – Talk to the family
  – Recommend support groups
• Understand the family dynamic
Remember:

It is important to show respect and concern, but NEVER insert yourself into this family dynamic – no matter how difficult it becomes. You will never be a part of the family, nor will you completely understand what they are going through. If the situation seems unbearable to the family, encourage them to consult a social worker or other professional that can offer help.
Cultural/language differences

According to the Alzheimer’s Association:

• Understand linguistic, economic and social barriers that individuals from different cultures face, preventing access to healthcare and social services. Try to provide services in a family’s native language.
• Understand that families from different cultures consider and use alternatives to Western healthcare philosophy and practice.
• Cultivate relationships with families over time.
• Consider the family’s background and experience in determining what services are appropriate.
• Consider the culture’s typical perceptions of aging, caring for elderly family members and memory impairment. Understand that a family’s culture impacts their choices regarding ethical issues, such as artificial nutrition, life support and autopsies.
• Regard the faith community for various cultures as a critical support system.
In summary:

• Be patient
  – with the person with Alzheimer’s
  – With her family
  – with yourself
• Be supportive
• Offer reassurance
• Be kind and never argue
• Speak in a slow, soft manner
• Use unspoken communication
  – touch an item
  – look her in the eye, respectfully
  – gesture to describe something
In Summary (Continued):

- Help her focus by providing a quiet environment that doesn’t create distractions.
- If she becomes frustrated trying to understand you or communicate with you, show her that you care about her and what she is trying to say; try not to interrupt her.
- Focus on the fact that sometimes the emotions behind the words are more important than what is being said; try to understand the feelings behind the words.
- Remember that a person with Alzheimer’s often has difficulty expressing her thoughts and emotions; she also has more trouble understanding others.
REMEMBER

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