Communication Tips and Techniques

for working with people living with dementia

Remember that anger and agitation result from the frustration of having cognitive deficits that are part of the condition, not a bad attitude.

Understand that illogical replies can result from forgetfulness and confusion, not from attempts to lie.

Initial Contact

Approach the person from the front. Put yourself at eye level when possible.

Establish a one-on-one connection. Ask others who are not needed to step away or move to another room.

Control the environment. To the extent possible, try to calm the surroundings. Turn down televisions, radios or other electronics; limit the number of people present, avoid side conversations and have only one person talk at a time.

Be aware of non-verbal communication. It should take the lead in your approach when possible. Open body language and friendly facial expressions can calm an agitated, confused person.

Be aware of the person’s reality. The person living with dementia may perceive the environment differently than you do.

Include a caregiver familiar with the person’s preferences and life history when possible. Knowledgeable caregivers can give the situation context and provide the valuable insight needed in a person-centered response.

Communication

Speak slowly and calmly. Try to make eye contact and speak directly to the person. Keep sentences short and use plain language. Try to avoid using abstract concepts or words.
Say your name and your role. Repeat your name. The person may not perceive your role based strictly on a name badge, uniform, surroundings or other visual cues.

Tell the person you are there to help. Smile. Use a gentle tone of voice.

Ask only one question at a time. When possible, ask closed questions – ones that can be answered yes, no, or other one or two word responses. If the person must make a choice between options, then limit the options to no more than two or three.

Give directions one step at a time, waiting until the first step is completed to give the next step.

Allow extra time for responses. Counting to 10 before expecting a response will help gauge how long to wait.

Treat the person as an adult. Avoid speaking to the person living with dementia as you would a child. Address the person as a respected elder.

Techniques

Use Validation. Don’t argue with a person with a cognitive disorder. Move to that person’s reality instead. If a person living with dementia insists it’s her birthday, then there is little you can do to change that firmly held, if untrue, belief.

Try Re-direction. People living with dementia can have short attention spans and may be diverted to another subject when they are agitated or angry. The idea with re-direction is to “change the subject”.