

## **Handout On Communication Tips For Breakfast (Lunch or Supper) Club Inservice**

### **Communicating With The Person With Dementia**

1. Believe that communication is possible but be sure that your goals for communication are realistic.
2. Find or bring an object to talk about, such as a bright red potted geranium for the table, an outrageous hat worn by the coordinator, pretty serving pieces or items likely to stimulate memories and reminiscence.
3. Pay attention to the physical environment and how it encourages or discourages communication. Assure the degree of privacy that seems appropriate, assure adequate lighting, ventilation and warmth. Turn off competing distractions, such as TV or radio, or move away from them.
4. See to the person's comfort, i.e. need to go to the bathroom, a sweater for warmth or a comfortable chair to accommodate a disability.
5. Enhance person's sensory input, i.e. locate eyeglasses or hearing aid and help the person to use them.
6. Do not startle the person or call to her unexpectedly. Always gain the person's attention with gentle touch or soft voice.
7. Face the person directly, smile, and use a friendly and relaxed manner. Sit opposite the person so that you are at about the same level if the conversation is to be brief, crouch down, but be prepared to stay if the person wants to continue the conversation.
8. Begin each conversation by calling the person by name and identifying yourself. Say: "Good morning Mr. Smith. I'm your aide, John." Do not say: "Do you remember me?" or "What's my name?"
9. Use short, specific, familiar words and simple sentences. Take turns frequently in conversation. Use short phrases of 4-7 words, not paragraphs.
10. Speak slowly and softly in a low-pitched voice according to the resident's ability to hear. Create a positive, supportive, calm atmosphere. Remember that persons with dementia often mimic the mood around them.
11. Give one direction or ask one question at a time.
12. Wait for an answer longer than you think necessary. If there is no answer, repeat the question, exactly. If still no response, rephrase it to make it simpler.

13. Use facial expressions, body language and gestures to support or demonstrate your words.
14. Respond to the person's message and emotional tone, rather than just the words: "I'm sorry you're upset - I'll try to be more clear", or use task-specific language: "Let's try it this way."
15. Reassure and acknowledge communication frequently. Persons who live in the moment need reassurance in the moment.
16. Residents with dementia commonly get stuck and can't find the word. They say a word that's close to the word they mean, but not quite right. Or they say a word that sounds like the word they want. Help them find the word through their associations with it. "It's like I eat with...in here (points to mouth)." You ask: "your teeth?"
17. If necessary repeat the person's last words to help him continue his thoughts. Many residents with dementia lose their train of thought in mid-sentence.
18. Use frequent non-verbal communications: nodding, smiling, patting, touching. Non-verbal communication travels different brain pathways than talking does, and often gets through to persons with cognitive impairments better than words do.
19. Use the words she uses, and use names of persons or objects rather than non-specific pronouns such as "she", "he", or "it". "Give the comb to me," rather than "Give it to me."
20. If communication ability is limited, ask questions that can be answered by yes, no or a gesture. Be willing to accept no response as an answer the person may choose, also. But, do attempt to elicit even brief replies beyond "yes" or "no".
21. Maintain a handshake distance apart until you are familiar with the person's preferences. This feels safer to some persons.
22. Do not argue or confront the person with his disabilities. Limit the number of don'ts" you use. State directions positively. (i.e. Instead of saying: "Don't pick up your food with your hands," say: "Perhaps, you could use the spoon and put it under the eggs to pick them up. Like this. That's right").
23. Show respect and acknowledgment for the feelings behind the words even when they are out of context and do not seem to make sense. Appreciate and acknowledge the trust placed in you by the person with dementia when he attempts the difficult task of trying to communicate with you. "Thank you, for telling me that, John. You want to tell me something about your chair that bothers you? Let me see if I can understand what you want me to do about it."
24. Assume the person can understand more than he can express, as the ability to understand outlasts the ability to verbalize. Never talk about him as if he isn't there or

cannot understand. Always include the person with dementia in the conversation when talking with someone else in the room.

25. Watch for signs of restlessness and withdrawal: increased hand movements, loudness, fidgeting, looking away or frowning. Tell him you understand this is not a good time to talk and you'll come back later. Realize that it may be difficult to converse with a person with dementia when they are tired, ill, in a new environment or over stimulated.

26. Listen carefully and attentively, but if you don't understand, let him know that you take responsibility for not understanding. Say, "I'm not understanding what you are saying. Help me to get it right." Not, "You're not making any sense."

27. Speaking to a person in his/her language of origin may get through when speaking in the person's second language does not.

28. Remember that the person with dementia is very sensitive to emotional tone in your voice, your body language, and your facial expression. If you are tense, nervous, rushed, angry, or annoyed, the person will sense it and mimic it or respond to your emotion as if it were meant for him/her personally.

29. Don't put persons with dementia "on the spot" by asking them something they can't answer. Allow them to save face whenever possible. Ask for opinions and feelings rather than facts.

30. People with dementia are not children; treat them as adults when you talk to them even as you are trying to simplify your communication.

31. Be patient with repetitive speech or reminiscence...think of it as a conversational ritual to help the person feel comfortable in his attempt to communicate with you.

32. Persons with dementia may be able to read, but may not understand what they read.

33. Try not to take the person's anger or agitation personally, no matter what is said. Keep in mind that the person with dementia has a disease, which is destroying brain cells. This makes a person frustrated and frightened over the memory loss and what is happening to them as a result of that. A person with dementia may yell, cry or seem agitated because they are at their wit's end over their inability to say or do something that they could accomplish successfully in the past.

34. Speaking louder doesn't help the person with dementia understand better. They sometimes think that you look angry and worry that you are angry with them. Speak more clearly and/or slowly.