

Tips for Better Communication

For caregivers, good communication is an essential part of interaction with the care receiver. Understanding what the care receiver needs/wants is one component; another is helping the care receiver understand what the caregiver needs them to do, such as giving instructions for bathing, dressing, eating, etc. Communication techniques that have worked in the past might now be useless, especially in the situation where the care receiver is experiencing memory loss or confusion. Here are some tips:

REALLY LISTEN

Take the time to listen to what the person is saying. Avoid multi-tasking so the care receiver knows you are listening.

Silence is OK - it allows someone to think about what is being discussed or how to respond. Try to determine what the person is hearing you say. In the case of memory loss/confusion this is especially important as the ability to understand and process information is hindered. When the care receiver feels heard and understood they may talk about things that concern them or cause them fear.

ASK QUESTIONS

Find out what is really going on. This may involve asking a series of simple yes/no questions if your loved one has memory impairment. Are you assuming some things about what the other person is saying because you think you know everything that is going on?

TALK DIRECTLY TO THE PERSON

Look the person in the eye. Put yourself on the same level as the care receiver. If they are seated, the caregiver should also be seated. Set aside time for one-to-one conversation. This may help to avoid misunderstandings later on.

SLOW DOWN

Take your time. Speaking at an even pace allows everyone to think through the conversation and how to reply.

AVOID ARGUING

Listen to concerns and try to understand the other person's experience and opinions. Remember that it is still his or her life and care. Focus on meeting unmet needs of care receiver and not on conflict.

When dealing with the care receiver who has memory loss/confusion, the ability to reason has been compromised so arguing is futile and will only cause frustration for the caregiver and care receiver. Instead, try to reassure that you understand that they are frustrated (angry, upset, etc.) and suggest solutions or offer redirection to another topic or activity.

USE "I" MESSAGES (vs "You" messages)

By using "I" messages, you communicate feelings, needs, concerns and thoughts as in "I am concerned...", "I need...", "I feel...". "I" messages are a positive way to express yourself. Communicating with "I" messages means you are not blaming someone else for your own feelings, therefore the other person is not put on the defensive as with "you" messages.

It takes practice to change to "I" messages. Practice substituting "I" for "you" in conversations with others until it becomes more comfortable. It can make a difference in how others respond in conversations, especially when difficult or challenging situations occur, such as having concerns about a loved one living alone. "I am concerned about your safety living in this big house alone" communicates your own feelings about the matter.

Caregivers are also faced with the need to communicate with healthcare professionals on behalf of their care receivers. Here are some tips to help with those visits:

BEFORE DOCTOR'S VISIT

Make a list of questions; include concerns and any symptoms that have been noticed, listing the most serious symptoms first. Ask a friend or relative to attend the appointment if that is needed. Having an extra set of ears can be helpful. Take a list of the bottles of current medications to the appointment. This will insure giving the medical personnel accurate information.

AT THE APPOINTMENT

Answer the doctor/nurse's questions openly and honestly. This helps to make a proper diagnosis. Listen carefully to what doctor has to say. If you don't understand something the doctor has said, ask to have it repeated or written down. Take notes if necessary.

If specific instructions are given for care, ask for them to be in writing. Repeat in your own words what doctor has told you to make sure you understand. Ask for a referral if you feel the need to see a specialist.

Information included in this article is from CargiverSupport.org and The Caregiver Helpbook. The Powerful Tools for Caregivers Workshop includes many suggestions and techniques for Caregivers to improve communication skills. The next Workshop series is scheduled for May 1—June 5, 1-3 pm at the Wells Public Library conference room. For more information or to register for the workshop, contact Interfaith Caregivers at 526-4684.

