

Caregiver's CORNER

By Joanne Hansen
Caregiver Consultant

When dementia or Alzheimer's Disease affects someone we love or care for it puts additional challenges on the family. We notice that among other issues, communication is not what it used to be. As one caregiver put it "I grieve the losses that we experience daily." Not being able to communicate effectively is definitely one of those losses.

A person with AD will have trouble finding the right words and understanding what words mean. Losing their train of thought is common. Their attention span is shorter. They may stare off into space and not be engaged in the conversation. Frustration can set in when communication isn't working. Understanding that it is the disease that causes these changes is the first step in coping with changes in communication skills. Secondly, try some things that make communication easier.

- Make eye contact
- Call them by name
- Be aware of your tone of voice and how loud it is
- Body language is the message you send just by the way you hold your body
- Encourage 2-way conversation as long as possible
- Use gentle touching to guide if speaking is not working

There are some techniques to encourage the person with Alzheimer's Disease to communicate with you. Show a warm, loving, matter of fact manner. Perhaps you can hold their hand while you talk. Be open to their concerns and let them make decisions when possible. Remember it is the disease not the person that is the cause, so try to remain patient. When it just becomes too difficult taking a "time out" for yourself is helpful.

When speaking to the person with AD use simple instructions, one step at a time. Repeat the instruction as needed. Do not talk about the person as if he or she isn't there. Do not speak to the person with "baby talk". Instead of pointing out mistakes you may say something like "Let's try this way." Use positives - "Please do this" instead of "Don't do this". Offer appreciation by saying thank you even if the results aren't perfect.

Asking questions that only require yes or no answers is helpful. Limit choices. For example, "Would you like to wear the red shirt or the blue shirt?" not "What would you like to wear today?" If the person doesn't understand what you say the first time, try using different words. Avoid saying "Don't you remember?" or "I told you that already".

As the disease progresses many times communication is just not possible any longer. One caregiver shared with me that when he visits his wife in the care facility he gives her about a 15 minute massage. She especially seems to appreciate the scalp massage. It is a way that he can offer comfort when words no longer are a way of communicating. Sitting in the silence and listening to favorite music together is another way of having some meaningful time together without speaking. Finding what works for you is what is important for you and your loved one.