

Communication and Dementia



AUDIO AVAILABLE ONLINE

Contact Amber Fisher at amber@trualta.com to learn more about how to get on-demand education for family caregivers.



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- ◆ Communicate effectively using simple sentences and non-verbal cues.
- ◆ Consider the benefits and consequences of reminding your loved one of accurate facts.
- ◆ Use three strategies to redirect conversation when you experience challenging situations.

Communication Challenges

Caregivers often ask for strategies to communicate with their loved one with dementia. As dementia progresses, communication can become more difficult. Someone with mild dementia may have a hard time finding the right word or may repeat the same stories or ask the same questions many times. Someone with moderate or severe dementia might have a hard time telling you what they are thinking. They may also have a hard time understanding you.



Strategies for Communication

There are four basic things you can do to make it easier to communicate with a person with dementia.

- 1. Avoid distractions.** Speak to the person in a room that is quiet. Turn off the TV and radio. Stop any other tasks you are doing and focus your attention on the conversation.
- 2. Use non-verbal cues.** Make eye contact with your loved one, and smile. This is very important. It can help put them at ease. Facial expressions and tone of voice can help communicate messages if it is hard for your loved one to understand sentences.
- 3. Simple messages.** Talk about one thing at a time. Use short sentences and give directions one step at a time. Give your loved one specific options like “would you like a cup of coffee or tea?”

- 4. Listen actively.** If you don't understand what your loved one said, politely let them know. You can also repeat back what you understood and ask them if it is correct.

Other strategies to keep in mind are:

- ◆ **Always use names.** Introduce yourself when talking to a loved one with dementia. For example, “Hi Mom, it’s me, Ben”. Avoid using pronouns like he, she, or they. Instead, use names when telling stories.
- ◆ **Start conversations.** You may notice that your loved one is talking less. Start a conversation with them about a topic that you would both like to discuss.
- ◆ **Try not to argue.** If the person says something you don’t agree with or isn’t true, you can let it go. If you constantly correct them, you likely will not have a good conversation. It can be helpful to try to find the meaning or message behind what your loved one said, instead of focusing on the facts.

Is it okay to lie to your loved one?

Conflicts may happen when a person with dementia believes something that the caregiver knows is not accurate. As dementia progresses, it is common for a person with dementia to ask questions about parents or spouses who have died. It is also common for people to talk about work, even if they have been retired for many years. These topics can come up many times a day, and each time caregivers are faced with a dilemma: is it okay to lie to their loved one to avoid arguments?

Telling the truth is an important value, but there are times when telling the truth causes more problems and has little benefit.



Sheila has been caring for her aging father for several years. Over the past few weeks, her father has started asking to see his own mother and father. Sheila knows that her father's parents died 20 years ago. When she tells her father that his parents have died, he gets upset and tells her that she is wrong and demands to leave to find his parents. This happens daily, as Sheila's father quickly forgets the conversation.

When you are responding to a loved one, you should consider the short-term and long-term effects of telling the truth versus not telling the truth. You should also consider what your loved one would want to experience.

In Sheila's case, telling her father that his parents have died does not change her father's reality. Telling her father that his parents have died will not have positive long-term effects, as her father forgets the conversation. Sheila's father taught her that it was always important to tell the truth, but she knows that each time she reminds him that his parents have died it causes him to experience stress, sadness, anger, and confusion. Sheila does not want her father to constantly experience these feelings.

In this case, by not telling her father the truth, Sheila can help her father feel safe and comforted.

There is no easy answer to whether it is okay for a caregiver to avoid telling the truth to their loved one. Each conversation is unique. However, there are a few strategies that caregivers can use to respond during these difficult conversations.

Strategies for Challenging Conversations

One option is to **respond to the feelings or emotions** instead of the facts. Remind yourself that even if the facts aren't real, the feelings that your loved one has are real. If your loved one is asking to see someone or go somewhere, it is often because they have an unmet physical or emotional need.

If Sheila's father is asking to see his parents, he may be feeling anxious, afraid, or lonely. Sheila can respond by asking her father if there is something she can help him with.

Another option is to **redirect the conversation**. To do this, you can start to talk to your loved one about a similar topic or an unrelated topic. If your loved one

is worried about getting to work on time, you can ask them to tell you what their job is like.

Sheila could respond to her father by saying “can you tell me about your mother?”. This responds to her father’s emotions but moves away from him asking to see his parents.

A third option is to **use distraction**. Try to get your loved one to focus on another conversation or activity. For instance, you could tell them that they need to have a snack before they go out, point out something you see outside the window, or get them to engage in a fun activity.

If Sheila’s father insists that he needs to see his parents, she could say that his parents would like him to have lunch here first before going home. By the time her father sits down to eat lunch, it is likely that he will have forgotten about seeing his parents.

Want to learn more? Explore these modules online:





Take the **QUIZ** online to track your progress



QUIZ

1. Ron's brother retired from his job as an accountant 15 years ago. Several years after he retired, he was diagnosed with dementia. Recently, there have been several instances where Ron's brother becomes agitated, and tells Ron that is going to be late for work. When this happens, Ron decides to tell his brother that he needs to find his work bag before he leaves for work. He helps his brother look for it for a few minutes, and then his brother moves on to a different activity.

What is this an example of?

- A. Distraction
 - B. Redirecting the conversation
 - C. Responding to the emotion
2. Ron thinks that his brother might be feeling restless. Ron decides to respond by asking his brother if he would like to do something with him, like go for a walk or work on a project at home.

What is this an example of?

- A. Distraction
- B. Redirecting the conversation
- C. Responding to the emotion

(Continued)



QUIZ

3. Ron could also ask his brother what he liked about being an accountant.

What is this an example of?

- A. Distraction
 - B. Redirecting the conversation
 - C. Responding to the emotion
4. Select all of the strategies that can be used to improve communication with a person with dementia.
- A. Eye-contact
 - B. Using names
 - C. Removing distractions
 - D. Simple messages

Contact Amber Fisher to learn more about how to get on-demand, personalized education for family caregivers.



amber@trualta.com



Toll Free 1800 214 5085

Answers: 1. A, 2. C, 3. B, 4. A-D