

LONG TERM CARE COMMUNITY COALITION

Advancing Quality, Dignity & Justice

LISTENING BEYOND WORDS: TIPS FOR DEMENTIA CAREGIVERS

FACT SHEET FOR INDIVIDUALS LIVING AT HOME OR IN ASSISTED LIVING

When a person is living with dementia, behavior often speaks louder than words. What may appear as “difficult” or “bad” behavior – such as agitation, aggression, or withdrawal – is often a response to unmet needs, fear, confusion, or pain. Understanding behavior as a form of communication allows caregivers and family members to respond with greater compassion, patience, and understanding.

This fact sheet offers practical tips to help caregivers and family members understand behaviors and communicate in ways that are respectful, compassionate, and effective. For more resources, please visit our website, <https://nursinghome411.org/dementia-care-in-the-community>.

Dementia is a Disability—Not a Choice

It is crucial to keep in mind that behaviors linked to dementia are not intentional or purposefully defiant. These behaviors are signals of discomfort, confusion, anxiety, or pain. Some common behavioral cues include:

- **Restlessness** = Discomfort, boredom, or pain.
- **Agitation** = Environmental change or confusion.
- **Aggression** = Fear, anxiety, or feeling misunderstood.

Remember:
All “behaviors”
are a form of
communication.

Tips for Before You Start Communicating

Before starting a conversation with someone living with dementia, it's important to create the right conditions for connection. A calm, supportive environment helps reduce confusion and increases the chances of a positive, meaningful interaction.

- **Create a calm environment:**
 - Ensure a quiet space with good lighting.
 - Minimize distractions (e.g., turn off TV or radio).
 - Meet basic needs first (e.g., hunger, thirst, bathroom, pain relief).
- **Plan enough time:**
 - Avoid rushing: Choose a time of day when the person is most alert.
- **Consider language needs:**
 - If the person speaks a different language or uses sign language, involve family members or interpreters if needed.
- **Get their full attention:**
 - Approach the person gently, make eye contact, say their name.

Tips for Talking with Someone Living with Dementia

- **Use simple, clear language:**
 - Keep sentences short and simple.
 - Avoid complex questions or instructions.
- **Be respectful:**
 - Avoid speaking down to the person as if they are a child.
 - Be patient and keep conversations conversational, not interrogative.
- **Include them in conversations:**
 - Don't talk as if the person is not present. Including them helps maintain their sense of identity.
- **Speak calmly and clearly:**
 - Avoid raising your voice or speaking sharply.

When Communications Becomes Difficult:

- **Rephrase, don't repeat:**
 - If the person doesn't understand, try saying it differently. Break down information into manageable pieces.
- **Use humor:**
 - Laugh together about misunderstandings to ease tension, but ensure the person feels respected.
- **Stay calm and positive:**
 - It's important to remain patient and stay calm, even when communication is difficult.
 - A positive and reassuring approach can help the person feel more comfortable.
- **Focus on the person's strengths:**
 - Instead of focusing on what the person with dementia can no longer do, focus on their abilities and interests. This helps foster a sense of dignity.
- **Use reminders:**
 - If needed, use prompts like photos or notes to help the person remember key information, people, or events.

A Note to Remember

Every person with dementia is different. Some tips may work better than others—be flexible and adjust as needed. With patience, empathy, and understanding, you can foster meaningful communication and connection.