

Patient information

Communicating with people with dementia and memory problems

People with dementia and memory problems often have difficulties with language and communication.



Do

- ✓ Use their name to get their attention.
- ✓ Sit face to face and make eye contact if you can.
- ✓ Minimise any background distractions, eg turn the TV off.
- ✓ Use short, simple sentences.
- ✓ Speak in a calm, clear way but use lots of facial expression, body language, tone of voice and gesture.
- ✓ Start conversations by saying “Mary I’d like to talk to you about.... and close the conversation, eg ‘Let’s get that cup of tea now’ or ‘All done’.
- ✓ Offer reassurance through physical contact if appropriate, e.g. holding their hand.
- ✓ Talk about the past and their memories.
- ✓ Give lots of time for them to process information and respond.
- ✓ Respond to the emotional tone in their voice, if they sound upset they probably are, even if they cannot express what they are upset about.
- ✓ Repeat and confirm when you can to help with memory difficulties and staying on topic in conversation. Try gentle reminders, ‘you were just saying John ...’
- ✓ If more than one person is talking, encourage only one person to speak at a time.
- ✓ Be positive and use helpful phrases such as ‘Don’t worry I can never remember anything either!’ or ‘let’s do this together’.
- ✓ Give small encouraging responses such as ‘aha’ and ‘hmmmm’ this shows that you are listening and also helps with turn taking in conversation.

Don't

- ✗ Ask lots of questions. They may be unable to remember facts so may become frustrated and upset.
- ✗ Tell them they are wrong if they are talking about someone or something which doesn't exist anymore. Use helpful phrases like "you seem to miss....." to start talking about the person or 'I bet you were great at.....'
- ✗ Contradict them as far as possible, try to redirect conversation.
- ✗ Rush them or become irritable if they are taking a long time to respond or repeating themselves.
- ✗ Correct them, acknowledge what they are saying and encourage them to say more about their answer. Or you can try and move the conversation on, eg "So, alright Mary, shall we look at those photos now".

Try

- To be sympathetic, imagine how frustrating it is not to understand or to be misunderstood.
- To use real items to explain what you are talking about. eg Shall we have a cup of tea (while holding up a cup).
- To be encouraging, use words such as "just", "pop", "little" or "for a minute", eg shall we just pop your jumper on as it's getting cold.
- To encourage them to be independent but offer to help. Use the word "we" so it is like you are doing it together, eg shall we try?
- Let them lead the conversation if possible. Look for clues about the subject they are talking about, eg pointing, gesture or body language.
- To listen if they are repeating themselves, it may be something that is worrying them. Help them feel reassured by saying something like 'I guess you're right'. Finding acceptable answers to questions helps the person's peace of mind, which may be enough to move the person on in conversation.
- Using a calendar or notice board. Keep a diary and calendar within reach so they can orientate themselves and remind themselves of visits and outings.
- Pictures with written labels on drawers, doors and cupboards to remind them what's inside eg cutlery, plates and cups, bathroom etc.
- To prioritise important things, eg having a wash, brushing their teeth and taking their medication and consider daily rehearsal of important information.
- If they can still write, encourage them to write down words or if they are still able to read, writing important words down may help with understanding as well as using

pictures and photos.

- Make a note of the best ways of communicating with your loved one so that you can tell others eg when they may have to go into hospital or respite.
- Unusual behaviour is a reaction and not deliberate. It might suggest fear or desperation. Think about possible causes like pain and discomfort, or isolation, boredom or any new medication, an infection so you may need to contact the GP.

To refer to Speech and Language Therapy contact the Care Coordination Centre on 0300 123 2425

If you would like any information regarding access to the West Suffolk Hospital and its facilities please visit the website for AccessAble (the new name for DisabledGo)

<https://www.accessable.co.uk/organisations/west-suffolk-nhs-foundation-trust>



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