



Gofal Cymdeithasol **Cymru**  
Social Care **Wales**

# Effective communication with people with dementia

First published: 10 October 2018

Last updated: 25 September 2022

This document was downloaded from [socialcare.wales](https://socialcare.wales) and may not be the latest version.  
Go to <https://socialcare.wales/resources-guidance/improving-care-and-support/people-with-dementia/effective-communication-with-people-with-dementia> for the latest version.

To communicate, we have to do certain things in a certain order. We must decide what we want to say and what method of communication would be most effective. We then send the message to someone else. They have to interpret the message and decide on their response and reply or react.

## **Why communication breaks down**

The process of communication can break down at any point.

Perhaps there's a lot of background noise and it's difficult to hear, maybe we're tired or we're using the wrong method of communication.

A breakdown in communication can result in feelings of frustration in a person living with dementia, which may in turn impact on the way they behave.

Consider how you feel when you cannot make yourself understood or cannot understand what is being asked of you, perhaps on a foreign holiday.

## **Recognising change in communication**

Communication skills will change over time. Changes may be subtle to begin with:

- taking a little longer to find the right word or describing items instead
- losing their train of thought mid-sentence
- difficulties understanding what is being said or following complex sentences.

As dementia progresses, people will rely more and more on the other person's nonverbal communication, how things are said and the tone of voice.

## **Effective communication**

It's important that we recognise these changes and adapt what we do to make communication as effective as possible.

### **Minimise distraction**

- turn the television off or move to a quieter area
- get the person's attention
- does the person prefer to be called Mrs Jones? Elizabeth? Liz? Betty?
- Use their name at the beginning of the sentence to cue a person in

### **Think about your body position**

- Can they see you?
- Get down to the person's level, make eye contact. The visual field will shrink as the dementia progresses, so always approach from the person's dominant side. You may need to get quite close before connection is made!

### **Speak clearly and calmly**

- Simplify your sentences without speaking in childlike terms
- Use words the person uses. So if they call the toilet the 'powder room', so should you
- Avoid joining two sentences together by using 'and', 'or', 'but'. Start a new sentence.

### **Think about your tone of voice**

- Don't speak to the person as you would to a child
- Your tone of voice will be affected if you are in a rush, cross, or fed up
- Remember it's not always what you say, it's how you say it!

### **Avoid too many questions**

- Consider yes / no questions
- While it's important to give people choices, sometimes too many choices will cause confusion.
- If you read out a list of choices at mealtimes, people often 'choose' the last on the list, as

it's the one they remember!

- It may be better to simply ask “would you like fish?” which requires a yes or no response or even better, show them the options.

## Communicate without words

- Use exaggerate gestures. For example, show a person how to brush their teeth by doing the actions instead of explaining how to do it
- Use pictures to help with decision making
- Consider writing it down. Some people will be able to read, whereas others may not
- Use touch to reinforce spoken word

## Case study about communicating effectively with someone with dementia

[View transcript](#)

### JOSEPH:

[00:00:13] It's interesting that when you see people drained when they're working with people with dementia,

[00:00:20] it's usually because they're working with the same person constantly, over and over and over and over and over.

[00:00:25] So the repetitive nature of the conversations you have with people with dementia, that starts to get really difficult for people, and it's just trying to understand that that's just the nature of that person.

[00:00:41] You can't get frustrated with somebody who's just constantly repeating themselves.

[00:00:47] And that's probably the biggest thing that you'll notice with people, they get frustrated with somebody with dementia because they've heard the same sentence, or the same question thirty times in the last hour, and that's the thing that really gets

people.

[00:01:00] The trick is to just step back from that and just realise that it's okay.

[00:01:06] They will forget that they've asked the question twenty/thirty times, but you have to make sure you answer it as if it's the first time.

[00:01:17] It's hard but you, and it takes practice, but it's a really important thing for them.

[00:01:25] I think the sense of respect that they feel coming from you isn't forgotten.

[00:01:33] So the content of what you've spoken about is lost but they'll realise that you're somebody that they can talk to, you're somebody that they can trust.

[00:01:43] They just don't know what's happening so it's just making sure that they understand that you're going to look after them.

[00:01:50] Because they don't get told that very often, "Don't worry, I'll protect you, it's okay",

[00:01:56] and that's a big thing for them, you know, they're just looking for reassurance a lot of the time.

[00:02:03] And I get asked "Will you look after me? Will you protect me?" "Yes, that's okay, that's my job. I'm here, I'll look after you, don't worry now. I'll make sure everything's okay".

[00:02:14] Even if you suspect that they're completely unaware of what you're saying, there is the chance that they are aware.

[00:02:23] So you've just got to keep going as if they understand every single thing, and just making sure "Yeah, yeah, yeah".

[00:02:31] Touch, very important, and just explaining exactly what's happening.

[00:02:37] Because even if they might not be able to communicate to you, they're still experiencing certain sensations, and if you can just get through to them just "It's okay, we'll look after you", that can be enough.

[00:02:50] One of the biggest don'ts is to become frustrated with them, you can't, you just can't do it.

[00:03:00] They pick up that you're frustrated, they know you're frustrated.

[00:03:06] They might not be able to communicate that, they might not be able to process it properly, but they know that there's something uncomfortable.

[00:03:15] And even if they forget the content of conversations you've already had, like I said, they tend to retain those sorts of, that feel of how things are.

[00:03:26] So they won't trust you and the moment they start to build up an air of mistrust with you, trying to get that back then is just...

[00:03:35] So it's really important to just let them understand that it's okay, you know, just be relaxed with them and just listen to them.

[00:03:45] They'll say things that are completely incorrect and that's okay, it's their world, and just go along with them.

[00:03:53] Just listen to them, ask them questions about anything.

[00:03:59] They might talk about something that happened in their childhood and just ask them, "Oh", and just see if you can get them to elaborate more on that particular event.

[00:04:10] Painful events, it's obviously try not to get them to elaborate too much on it,

[00:04:16] because that event to them may have only happened yesterday, so it may be still quite, still feel really quite raw for them,

[00:04:24] whereas with happy events, again it might feel like it only happened yesterday, so getting them to elaborate on them can really change their mood.

## Useful resources

Find out more about effective communication with people living with dementia.

[Communication tips from Dementia UK](#)

[7 things not to say to somebody with dementia](#)

[The Daily Sparkle \(a daily reminiscence newspaper full of articles, quizzes, old news stories, gossip, puzzles, singalongs and entertainment geared towards stimulating the mind and improving memory\)](#)

[Relish \(a suite of activity products to assist people with dementia in leading active, engaging and fulfilling lives – enjoying activities that are meaningful to them\)](#)

[Apps for Communication - A series of downloadable tools that can help people who have difficulty communicating verbally to express their wishes](#)

## Research links

Improve your practice by accessing the latest research findings.

[Language changes in bilingual individuals with Alzheimer's disease \(2015\)](#)

[Mapping differences in memory and thinking abilities in people with and without dementia. Alzheimer's Society\)](#)

[A minimal interference technique to improve memory in people with Alzheimer's](#)

## We want your feedback

Help us to improve the Dementia resource for care professionals by telling us what you think about it in our short [four question survey](#).