

Caring for Seniors

A directory of those who serve our seniors

How to communicate with someone who has dementia

Conversations tend to be challenging for people with dementia, especially as the condition progresses. This doesn't mean, however, that discussions aren't energizing and enjoyable for them. In fact, people with dementia derive joy, comfort and stimulation from conversations with friends and family members. If someone close to you has dementia, here are some tips for effectively communicating with them.

- Get their attention. Address the person by their first name and maintain eye contact.
- State your message clearly. Speak slowly, use simple words and short sentences and be direct. If initially the person doesn't understand what you say, repeat the message using the same wording. If he or she is still unable to understand, wait a couple minutes then try again, simplifying your phrasing if possible.
- Show warmth and positivity. Encourage the person, show your affection for them and take care not to reveal frustration or impatience.
- Rely on nonverbal cues. Use facial expressions and touch (when appropriate) to convey your emotions and your message. When speaking, pay extra attention to your tone of voice. Such considerations are especially important when the person is having difficulty or is unable to comprehend what you say. The affection and respect you show will be understood



regardless.

Use names, not pronouns. Avoid pronouns like "he," "she" and "they," and instead repeat the names of the people you're talking about. Doing this helps those with dementia better follow the thread of the conversation.

Finally, know that you're affection is reciprocated. Although people with dementia sometimes forget names and even faces, they recognize when they're speaking with someone who cares about them.



Three misconceptions about cognitive aging

Cognitive aging refers to the changes a person undergoes in their ability to think, sense and reason as they get older. It seems simple enough, but in fact, it's a subject that's rife with misconceptions. Here are three of them:

1. Cognitive aging is synonymous with cognitive decline. Health professionals judge that it's incorrect to speak of a decline, given that cognitive aging is a natural process and one characterized by enormous variability. It's true that a person's memory tends to become less sharp as they age and their mental processes tend to slow. However, this isn't the same thing as a change in intelligence. In fact, there's no reason cognitive aging should interfere with a person continuing to learn new skills as they get older.
2. Cognitive aging is connected to Alzheimer's disease. While the signs of cognitive aging resemble the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease to some degree, the two should not be confused. Alzheimer's is a neurodegenerative

disease characterized by severe declines in cognitive capabilities. Cognitive aging, on the other hand, isn't a disease but a natural part of getting older; the changes in cognitive ability to which it refers vary and are gradual.

3. Nothing can be done about age-related cognitive changes.

Cognitive aging may be a natural process, but the extent to which one's ability to think, sense and reason will change over the years can be controlled. You can be mentally sharp at any age. To attend to your cognitive health, the National Academies of

Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recommends the following:

- Be physically active. Physical health goes hand-in-hand with mental health.
- Be socially and intellectually active. Seek out new experiences and new learning opportunities.
- Make sure you're sleeping well. The quality of your sleep directly impacts your cognitive functioning. Consult a health professional if you're having trouble sleeping.
- Manage your medications. Certain medications can negatively affect one's cognitive functions.

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