

effective communication strategies



Program goals

communication
effective strategies

By the end of today's program, you will be able to:

- Explain the communication changes that take place throughout the course of the disease.
- Decode the verbal and behavioral messages delivered by someone with dementia and respond in ways that are helpful to the person.
- Identify strategies to connect and communicate at each stage of the disease.

What is communication?

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Communication changes throughout the disease

Early stage (Mild)

- Convey thoughts and feelings through language.
- Able to make decisions about future care.
- May misinterpret what others say.

Middle stage (Moderate)

- Use basic words and sentences.
- Rely more on tone of voice, facial expression and body language.
- Continue to need emotional connection and meaningful activity

Late stage (Severe)

- May still respond to familiar words, phrases or songs.
- Use body language and the five senses to connect.

4

Communication in the early stage

Changes you may notice include:

- Difficulty finding the right words.
- Taking longer to speak or respond.
- Withdrawing from conversations.
- Struggling with decision-making or problem-solving.

5



Martha Tierney, LCSW, is Associate Director of Research Volunteer Programs for the National Office of the Alzheimer's Association.

6

Communication in the early stage

To connect:

- Ask directly how to help with communication.
- Keep sentences clear and straightforward.
- Leave plenty of time for conversations.
- Include the person in conversations that affect him or her, including planning for the future.



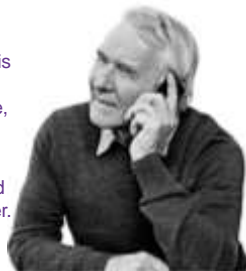
7

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Communication in the early stage

Keep in mind:

- Avoid making assumptions.
- Speak directly to the person.
- Communicate in the way that is most comfortable for the person. Options include phone, email, and in person.
- Laugh together.
- Be honest, laugh together, and stay connected with each other.



8

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Communication in the middle stage

Changes you may notice include:

- Increased difficulty finding the right words.
- Using familiar words repeatedly.
- Inventing new words to describe familiar things.
- Easily losing train of thought.
- Speaking less frequently.
- Communicating through behavior rather than words more often.

Consult a doctor when you notice major or sudden changes.

9

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Beverly is a caregiver support group facilitator whose husband has Alzheimer's disease.


10

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Communication in the middle stage

To connect, approach the person gently

- Approach from the front, say who you are and call the person by name.
- Maintain eye contact and get at eye level if seated or reclining.
- Avoid criticizing, correcting and arguing.
- Pay attention to your tone.
- Take your time.



11

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Rebecca's mother had Alzheimer's disease.

12

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Communication in the middle stage

To connect, join the person's reality

Keep respect and empathy in your mind, then:

- Assess the person's needs.
- Let the person know you hear his or her concerns, whether they are expressed through words, behavior or both.
- Provide a brief answer.
- Respond to the emotions behind the statement.

13

Communication in the middle stage

To connect, keep it slow and basic

- Use short sentences and basic words.
- Speak slowly and clearly, one person and one question at a time.
- Limit distractions.
- Be patient.
- Offer a guess or fill in words if acceptable.

14

Communication in the middle stage

To connect, give multiple cues

- Provide visual cues and gestures.
- Avoid sudden movement.
- Write things down for the person.
- Put answers into your questions.
- Repeat as needed.
- Turn negatives into positives.
- Avoid quizzing.



15

Communication in the middle stage

To connect, respond empathically and reassure

- Join the person's reality.
- Provide reassurance that you hear and understand.
- Focus on the feelings, not the facts.
- Validate and redirect the person if necessary.

16

Communication in the late stage

Changes you may notice include:

- Communication is reduced to a few words or sounds.
- Possible responses to familiar words or phrases.

To connect:

- Listen for expressions of pain and respond promptly.
- Help the person feel safe and happy.
- Continue to bring respect to each conversation.
- Keep talking.
- Use all five senses to communicate.

17



Sandra's mother is in the late stage of Alzheimer's disease.

18

Communication in the late stage

Connect through touch

- Feel different fabrics.
- Identify shapes by touch.
- Give lotion hand massages.
- Identify everyday items in a bag by touch.
- Visit with animals.
- Sculpt using non-toxic materials.
- Hold the person's hand or stroke his or her arm or back.



19

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Communication in the late stage

Connect through sight

- Laminate brightly colored pictures to look at together.
- Watch videos of animals, nature or travel.
- Look at photo albums together.
- View photos of famous paintings, favorite settings or prominent people from the past.
- Go bird-watching or visit an aquarium.
- Paint with watercolors.
- Go outdoors or sit by an open window together.

20

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Communication in the late stage

Connect through sound

- Listen to familiar music.
- Listen to recordings of the sounds of nature, farms, cities or animals.
- Identify musical instruments by sound.
- Listen to songs or speech in the person's native language.
- Read books, poetry, scripture, or newspaper articles to the person.
- Let the person hear the gentle tone of your voice.

21

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Communication in the late stage

Connect through smell

- Make small plastic bags containing items for the person to smell, such as:
 - Herbs or spices.
 - Cotton balls dipped in essential oils.
 - Grass clippings or fragrant flowers.
 - Teas or coffee beans.
- Use fragrant lotions for hand massages
- Cook or feed the person foods that smell good, such as apple pie or chicken soup.

22

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Communication in the late stage

Connect through taste

- Favorite foods.
- Home-baked goodies.
- Popsicles.
- Flavored drinks.
- Ice creams and puddings.



23

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Communication in all stages of the disease

- Join the person's reality to connect.
- Understand and accept what you can and cannot change.
- Remember that the person retains a sense of self despite the losses of the disease.
- Demonstrate respect and connect through feelings.
- Always treat the person as the adult he or she is.
- Try to decode the person's communications.
- Recognize the effects of your mood and actions.
- Try to understand the source of reactions.
- Help meet the needs while soothing and calming the person.

24

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Sam Fazio, Ph.D., is the Director of Special Projects for the National Office of the Alzheimer's Association.

25

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Contact us – we can help

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- Alzheimer's Navigator
- Community Resource Finder
- ALZConnected
- Alzheimer's and Dementia Caregiver Center
- Safety Center

800.272.3900

- 24/7 Helpline – Available all day every day

alz.org/findus

- Support groups, education programs and more available in communities nationwide

training.alz.org

- Free online education programs available at training.alz.org

26

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Get involved

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volunteer

THE LONGEST DAY

advocate

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27

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Questions?

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We're here. All day, every day.

24/7 Helpline: 800.272.3900

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