

The “Golden rules” of effective communication

Ensuring good communication with elders who have a dementia illness, like Alzheimer’s disease, is extremely important.

“Front line staff in any health-care setting may waste valuable time by communicating ineffectively,” writes dementia care expert Dr. Zoe Elkins, in the Dec. 2011 issue of the journal *Nursing Older People*.

And, when this happens, meeting the special needs of those with dementia becomes virtually impossible.

Follow the golden rules

Elkins, who is head of care strategy at the Good Care Group, in the UK, says communicating effectively with dementia elders boils down to following a few simple golden rules.

Here is what they are:

- **Create a personal information sheet** for each of your elders.

It will be your “communication bridge” with them. It should include:

- positive memories from the past that the elder enjoys talking about,
- questions the elder tends to ask more frequently, and
- answers they like to hear.

Use this information in your conversations with the elder. It will make the communication significantly easier.

- **Spend more time with them.** You will be better able to understand their feelings and, consequently, deal with challenging behaviors appropriately.

For example, an elder with dementia may express anxiety or fear by repeatedly calling out for attention.

Reassure them.... let them know that all is well.... it takes just a few minutes, says Elkins, and “is a good investment in time.”



Using a photo album in your conversations with elders with dementia is an effective way to make the communication easier. (Photo: iStockphoto/cgering.)

- **Use a photo album.** This is one of the most effective ways to improve the communication with someone with dementia.

And that’s because this method taps into the elder’s ability to remember the distant past.

Looking at the photos brings back happy memories, from which you can learn about the elder’s personality, interests, preferences and needs.

This information will be useful, just like the one in the information sheet, as a “bridge” for easier communication.

- **Don’t ask direct questions.** They place strain on the elder’s short-term memory, which, is greatly impaired by the dementia.

As a result, they can generate confusion, which can rapidly escalate to agitation. It is best to use statements.

Create a personal information sheet for each of your elders

So, for example, instead of asking: “Would you like to try this walker?” say: “I’ve found this walker and thought you might like it and find it useful.”

The elder will feel reassured about being in control and will be more likely to cooperate.

Spend more time with them so you can better understand their feelings

- **Avoid contradicting.** “This is extremely unproductive,” Elkin explains. “It is far better to go along with an individual sense of reality rather than reminding them what they have got wrong or can no longer achieve.”
- **Don’t blame the elder** if they have a difficulty or make a mistake, for they may lose their self-esteem and become withdrawn, making it even more difficult to communicate with them.

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