

Total communication strategies for carers

Non-verbal strategies

The following are non-verbal techniques you could use to assist communication:

- Observe the physical characteristics of the person, and try to match these as closely as possible, e.g. if the person you are communicating with has a closed posture – match it as far as possible with a closed posture. If you face them with the other extreme, i.e. an open posture, it may be too threatening for them.
- Match the person's most responsive sense e.g. if someone prefers visual stimuli, give good and consistent eye contact. Similarly don't use a sense that they dislike e.g. if someone does not like the visual sense, do not give prolonged eye contact, because this will be counter-productive.
- Use a clear, calming voice, because this is not threatening.
- Centre yourself. Put personal feelings away. Don't take what they say personally, since it is usually not directed personally towards you.
- If someone is telling you something that is completely non-sensical, try to imagine that it is true, so that you display an appropriate emotion. Remember to match this emotion with the appropriate body language, facial expression and tone of voice.
- Ensure the person is attending before you deliver a message e.g. touch their arm, to focus their attention, if this is a responsive sense.
- Use gesture to accompany your speech and language, since this may help the person to understand e.g. asking them do they want a cup of tea whilst making the gesture of someone drinking.
- Use facial expression to convey your mood – words will not always do this effectively.
- Exaggerate your stress and intonation when asking a question etc., to convey your message. "Do YOU want to have a bath?" (Raise intonation at end for question).
- Remove distractions that may interfere with their attention/comprehension, e.g. turn off the TV whilst communicating with the person.
- Consider the use of hearing aids/glasses, since these may enhance communication.
- Consider the rate of speech – don't bombard them with too much information at once.

Not all of these techniques will work for each person, since each individual is different. You need to use the suggested strategies with the people you are dealing with, to see which ones will be most effective.

Verbal strategies

You could adapt your language in the following ways:

- Use questions, which need short, specific answers/facts – not reasoning.
E.g. use who/what/when/where i.e. “Who is visiting you?” 4
Not “WHY did she come to see you today?” 6
- Reduce the level of syntactic complexity. Use short sentences and command, which can enhance the understanding, since the person does not have to retain lengthy utterances.
E.g. “Can you go and finish your tea and then put your coat on?”
Wait until the y have finished their tea, THEN say “Put your coat on” 4
E.g. “The fire was lit by Emily” 6
“Emily lit the fire” 4
- Pause both within and between sentences. Breaks longer sentences into chunks.
E.g. Instead of “It’s now 10 ‘o’ clock and I’m making a cup of tea – shall I make one for you too?” 6
Try:
“It’s 10 ‘o’ clock”. PAUSE
“The tea’s made”. PAUSE
“Do you want a cup?” 4
- Use alerters to give the person time to tune into listening to you, before giving the important content of what you want to say.
E.g. say the person’s name, so that they focus their attention on you. Now give them the command/information etc.
- Place the main words at the end of a sentence.
E.g. NOT “I’m making a **sandwich** – would you like one?” 6
BUT “Would you like a **sandwich**?” 4
The person is more likely to remember the topic if the main words are placed at the end of a sentence.
- Be specific about WHO / WHAT / WHERE / WHEN.
E.g. “Is he coming to see you today?” 6
“Is Arthur coming to see you today?” 4
Repeat the name of the person or object you are referring to rather than assume that the person has remembered who / what / where / when you were previously talking about.
- Ask either/or questions or yes/no questions to facilitate a response from the person. This gives them some control over their environment.
E.g. “Do you want FISH or CHICKEN for dinner?” 4
OR
“Do you want fish?” “Do you want chicken?” 4
- Be explicit and direct in what you want them to understand.
E.g. “I’m doing something else” is easier for them to understand than “I’m washing the dishes at the moment”.
With the second sentence they have to imply information which will be difficult.

- Be literal in what you say.
E.g. "It's raining cats and dogs" 6
"It's raining a lot" 4
We forget how often we use popular phrases such as this, which the person with Dementia will have difficulty understanding, because a certain level of language is needed, in order to interpret what this phrase actually means.
- Avoid analogies – which again need a certain language ability in order to process what the person who says it actually means.
E.g. "It's like banging your head against a brick wall" 6
"It's difficult" 4
- Avoid sarcasm – because the person may not be able to understand the intonation.
E.g. "Hmmm...that's lovely" (when you don't really mean it).

Not all of these techniques will work for each individual, since each person is different e.g. a person in the severe stage may not be able to make a choice from forced alternatives i.e. "fish" or "chicken", but this type of strategy is often very successful in the early stages.
You really need to try out the suggested strategies with the individuals you are in contact with.

Read our 'Find other support for 'communication' info sheet to find other local and national support organisations.

