Communication changes in people with Alzheimer's disease

What are the communication changes in people with Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia can affect the way that people communicate and understand what people are telling them.

Every person with Alzheimer's disease is slightly different. All people with Alzheimer's disease will eventually have problems communicating with friends, family and other caregivers.

Some of the most common communication changes are:

- Difficulty finding a word
  - Sometimes they will use related words (for example, calling a newspaper a book)
- Creating new words or phrases for ones that are forgotten
  - They may lose a word but substitute it for other words and phrases (for example, calling a chair "something we sit on")
- Repeating a word or phrase
  - This can be fluent speech, but it might not make sense
- Difficulty organizing words into logical sentences
- Cursing or using other offensive language
- Reverting to the language that was first learned
- Talking less than usual

Remember, Alzheimer's disease can not only make it harder for the person to find the right words, but it can also make it harder for them to understand what is being said.

How do I prepare for communicating with a person with Alzheimer's disease?

There are a number of strategies that can make it easier for you and the person with Alzheimer's disease to communicate. The table below provides some strategies that people can use to prepare for speaking to someone with Alzheimer's disease.

Strategies to prepare for talking with a person with Alzheimer's disease	
Find the right place to talk	– This should be quiet, with good lighting and not too many distractions (for example, not having a television or radio on in the background)
Get his or her attention	– Before starting to communicate, make sure you have the person's full attention
Sit in the right position	– Sit where the person can clearly see your face – Sitting is better than standing – Sit close to the person and make eye contact
Body language is important	– When people with dementia have a harder time to understand words, they rely more on body language – Make sure your body language is open and relaxed
Take your time	– Make sure you have the time to talk with the person – If you feel rushed, stressed or anxious, take some time to calm down before starting to talk
Think about what you want to talk about	– Have a few ideas of what you want to talk about – Consider talking about things in the person's environment (for example, their food, activities)
Pick a time that works for the person	– People with Alzheimer's disease have good and bad days – Try to communicate more on good days and not to be stressed about communicating on bad days
Make sure the person's needs are met before you start	– It will be much harder to communicate with a person with Alzheimer's disease if he or she is hungry or has to go to the bathroom – By making sure his or her needs are met first, it can make it easier to communicate

How do you speak to people with Alzheimer's disease?

How to speak

There are a number of things that you can do to improve your communication with a person with Alzheimer's disease. These include:

— Speak clearly and calmly
— Speak at a slightly slower pace
— Allow time between sentences for the person to process them
— Avoid speaking sharply or raising your voice
— Use short and simple sentences
— Try to communicate in a normal conversational way. Avoid just using question after question
— Don't talk about the person as if they are not there or like they are a young child
— Try to laugh together at misunderstandings or mistakes
— Include the person in conversation with others

What to say and the importance of listening

Here are a few suggestions that can improve what you say to people with Alzheimer's disease:

— Avoid complicated questions, which can frustrate a person with Alzheimer's disease
— Try to stick to one idea at a time
— Ask questions that allow for a 'yes' or 'no' answer or use questions with limited choices (such as 'would you like water or coffee?')
— Rephrase the question instead of just repeating it. Consider pointing to pictures or objects to help to clarify
— If the person tires easily, keep the communication short
— Listen carefully to what the person is saying and offer encouragement
— If you don't understand what the person has said, rephrase what you have understood and check to see if you have it right
— Allow plenty of time for the person to respond
— If the person is feeling sad, let him or her express their feelings. Don't dismiss what he or she is feeling. Sometimes the best thing you can do is to listen and show that you care

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