Communication Techniques

It’s not what you say, but how you say it. This expression holds particularly true when communicating with individuals with dementia.

Alzheimer’s disease and related illnesses impair a person’s ability to understand words and to speak. However, the person can still benefit from non-verbal communication—body language, voice tone and facial expressions. As the individual’s ability to process verbal information declines, the importance of how caregivers communicate with the person, verbally and non-verbally, increases.

Here are some tips to enhance interactions:

- Remember that the individual with dementia might be feeling confused, anxious, irritable and depressed, and suffering from low self-esteem.
- Speak in a tone that is calm and reassuring; talk slowly and distinctly; and use simple words.
- Approach the individual from the front. It may startle and upset him or her if you touch unexpectedly or draw near from behind.
- Before asking the individual to do something, address him or her by name to get the person’s attention. While you are speaking, maintain eye contact.
- Ask only one question at a time and allow time for an answer. If he or she does not seem to understand, repeat the question using the same wording. If this does not work, after a few minutes, rephrase it.
- If the individual repeatedly asks a question, keep in mind that he or she cannot remember the response that you have just given. Instead of answering the question after a second or third repetition, reassure the individual in the same way—everything is fine, you will be with him or her, you will help.
- Eliminate distractions, such as the TV or radio, when talking to the person.
- Avoid statements that sound negative. For example, instead of “Don’t go outside,” say “Stay inside.”
- Break down all tasks into simple steps. Tell the individual one step at a time what to do. If the individual gets upset and becomes uncooperative, stop and try again later.
- Use non-verbal gestures, when appropriate, to help convey what you want done. For example, point to objects or demonstrate, such as brushing your teeth.
- Smile—a smile sends a powerful message of reassurance.
- Use humor whenever possible, though not at the individual’s expense.
- Keep on talking, even when a person may no longer be verbal. Chat about things that mattered to the person and mention names of family and friends. Even if the communication is one-sided, it can loudly show that you care.