

Communication Strategies for Interacting with People with Memory Loss

fact sheet - 7

DO

- Treat the person with memory loss with dignity and respect.
- Be calm and reassuring; watch your tone of voice and body language.
- Stay positive and use humor whenever possible, but **not** at the person's expense.
- Give short, one-sentence explanations.
- Repeat instructions or sentences **exactly** the same way.
- Tell the person who you are and why you are there.
- Allow plenty of time for comprehension.
- Agree with them or distract them to a different subject or activity.
- Accept the blame when something's wrong (even if it's fantasy).
- Leave the room, if necessary, to avoid confrontations.
- Minimize distraction. Talk away from crowds, noise, etc.
- Do what you can to help them past embarrassing situations to "save face."
- Be patient and cheerful and reassuring. Go with the flow.

DON'T

- Reason, argue, confront or remind them they forget,
- Question recent memory or ask them if they remember something.
- Disagree with misinterpretations or hallucinations unless they are frightening.
- Don't take it personally.

REMEMBER

They are saying normal things, and doing normal things, for a person with AD. If they were doing things, or saying things, to deliberately aggravate you, *they would have a different diagnosis.*

Some days they'll seem normal, but they're not. Their reality is now different than yours and you *cannot change them.* You can't control the disease. You can only control *your reaction* to it.



Their disability is memory loss. They cannot remember and *can't remember that they cannot remember.* They'll ask the same questions over and over *believing it's the first time they've asked.*

They do not hide things; they *protect* things by putting them in a safe place and then forgetting they've done so. Do not take "stealing" accusations personally.

They are scared all the time. Each person reacts differently to fear. They may become passive, uncooperative, hostile, angry, agitated, verbally abusive, or physically combative. They may even do them all at different times, or alternate between them. Anxiety may compel them to *shadow you* (follow everywhere). They can't remember your reassurances. Keep saying them.

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Examples:

Don't reason

Patient: "What doctor's appointment? There's nothing wrong with me."

Don't: (reason) "You've been seeing the doctor every three months for the last two years. It's written on the calendar and I told you about it yesterday and this morning."

DO: (short explanation) "It's just a regular check-up." (accept blame) "I'm sorry if I forgot to tell you."

DO repeat exactly

Patient: "I'm going to the store for a newspaper."

Don't: (repeat differently) "Please put your shoes on. You'll need to put your shoes on."

DO: (repeat exactly) "Please put your shoes on."
"Please put your shoes on."

Don't remind them forget

Patient: "Joe hasn't called for a long time. I hope he's okay."

Don't: (remind) "Joe called yesterday and you talked to him for 15 minutes."

DO: (reassure) "You really like talking to Joe, don't you?" (distract) "Let's call him when we get back from our walk."

Don't argue

Patient: "I didn't write this check for \$500. Someone at the bank is forging my signature."

Don't: (argue) "What? Don't be silly! The bank wouldn't be forging your signature."

DO: (respond to feelings) "That's a scary thought." (reassure) "I'll make sure they don't do that again." (distract) "Would you help me fold the towels?"

Don't ask questions about recent memory

Patient: "Hello Susie. I see you've brought a friend with you."

Don't: (question memory) "Hi, Mom, you remember Eric don't you?" "What did you do today?"

DO: (short explanation) "Hi, Mom, you look wonderful! This is Eric, we work together."

Don't take it personally!

Patient: "Who are you? Where's my husband?"

Don't: (take it personally) "What do you mean who's your husband, I am!"

DO: (go with the flow, reassure) "He'll be here for dinner." (distract) "How about some milk and cookies?" "Would you like chocolate chip or oatmeal?"

Don't confront

Patient: "Nobody's going to make my decisions for me. You can go now and don't come back!"

Don't: (confront) "I'm not going anywhere and you can't remember enough to make your own decisions."

DO: (accept blame or respond to feelings) "I'm sorry this is a tough time." (reassure) "I love you and we're going to get through this together." (distract) "You know what? Don has a new job. He's really excited about it."

DO eliminate "but", substitute nevertheless

Patient: "I'm not eating this. I hate chicken."

Don't: (say "but") "I know chicken's not your favorite food. *But* it's what we're having for dinner?"

DO: (say "nevertheless") "I know chicken's not your favorite food, (smile) *nevertheless* I'd appreciate it if you'd eat a little bit."