

Keeping Connected to Someone with Memory Loss

A person with memory loss due to Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia will experience changes in communication skills – both expressing oneself and understanding others. These are some of the changes you may notice that gradually appear over time:

- Difficulty finding the right words
- Repeating questions or statements
- Difficulty organizing ideas
- Trouble tracking conversations
- Using familiar words or phrases repeatedly
- Mixing up tenses (past and present)
- Mixing up words and phrases
- Inventing words
- Reverting to one's first language
- Speaking rarely or not at all

In order to keep connected, your approach is key:

- **Identify yourself.** Approach the person from the front, make eye contact, and explain who you are. Do not quiz someone about your name or the nature of your relationship.
- **Position yourself.** Sit close by, at eye level. Gently touch the person with a handshake or hug.
- **Limit distractions.** Turn off a TV or radio. Find a place that is quiet, so that he or she you can focus on thoughts and words. Having more than one person at a time may be overwhelming. One-to-one conversation works better, especially if the person has hearing loss.
- **Avoid criticizing or correcting.** Don't tell the person that what is being said may be incorrect or untrue. Rather, listen and try to find meaning in what is being said. Repeat if clarification is needed.
- **Don't argue.** If something is said that you don't agree with, let it be. Arguing makes things worse.
- **Be patient and supportive.** Respond to repeated questions but redirect to another topic if the person gets stuck in a loop. Let the person know you're listening and trying to understand what is being said. Let the person describe what he or she wants, without interruptions. Ask questions to clarify.
- **Avoid advance notices.** Talking about upcoming plans may be confusing. Be in the moment instead of preparing the person for a future activity such as "You have a doctor's appointment next Tuesday."
- **Offer a guess.** If the person appears frustrated, try helping out. As long as you understand, the right words may not be necessary.
- **Offer comfort and reassurance.** If the person is having difficulty expressing oneself, say it's okay. Encourage words and thoughts, no matter how jumbled.
- **Focus on feelings, not facts.** Look for the feelings behind the words. At times, tone of voice and other actions may help you understand how the person is really feeling.

In order to keep connected, choose your words carefully:

- **Provide simple explanations.** Avoid using logic and reason. Respond clearly and concisely
- **Use short, familiar words and sentences.** Don't overwhelm the person with lengthy requests or stories. Speak concisely and get to the point.
- **Talk slowly and clearly.** Be aware of speed and clarity when speaking. Don't rush.
- **Give simple directions.** Break tasks and instructions into simple steps, one step at a time.
- **Ask one question at a time.** Don't overwhelm him or her with more than one question at a time. Use questions with two responses rather than open-ended questions: "Would you like to take a walk or listen to music?" "Would you like to eat chicken or fish?"
- **Turn questions into answers.** Try providing a solution, rather than the question. For example, say "The bathroom is right here" instead of asking, "Do you need to use the bathroom?"
- **Avoid pronouns.** Instead of saying, "Here it is," try saying "Here is your sweater."
- **Repeat information or questions.** If you get no response, wait a moment and ask again. Use the same phrasing or simplify what you've just said.
- **Give visual clues.** Demonstrate your request by pointing, touching or beginning a task for someone.
- **Avoid quizzing.** Reminiscence can be useful but avoid asking questions that reply upon one's short-term memory.
- **Be creative!** Try singing or play familiar music to tap into long-term memories. Use a CD player, an iPod or a similar device with headphones – kids and other young people can download favorite tunes.
- Here are more examples of things to avoid saying and alternatives:

Don't Say

Do Say

1. What did you have for lunch today?	How was lunch today?
2. What did you do today?	How is it going? How are you feeling?
3. What would you like to do now?	Would you like to take a walk with me or go to the store with me?
4. Do you know who I am?	Hi, I'm so glad to see you. My name is...
5. What kind of music do you like?	What's your favorite song? Who is your favorite singer?
6. You have repeated that story several times already.	That sounds interesting. I'd like to know more about it.
7. Please stop doing asking me the same question.	You know I'd really like to stretch my legs. Would you like to join me on a walk?