

effective communication strategies



Program goals

By the end of today's program, you will be able to:

- Explain the communication changes that take place throughout the course of the disease.
- Decode the verbal and behavioral messages delivered by someone with dementia and respond in ways that are helpful to the person.
- Identify strategies to connect and communicate at each stage of the disease.

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What is communication?

Connecting with others
Conversation
Self-expression
Body language
Listening
Interaction
Making Decisions
Sense of Self
Talking
Attitude
Relationships
Sending messages
Tone of voice
Facial expressions
WORDS
EXPRESSIONS
Communication

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Communication changes throughout the disease

Early stage

- Convey thoughts and feelings through language.
- Able to make decisions about future care.

Middle stage

- Use basic words and sentences.
- Rely more on tone of voice, facial expression and body language.
- Continue to need emotional connection and meaningful activity.

Late stage

- May still respond to familiar words, phrases or songs.
- Use body language and the five senses to connect.
- Continue to need emotional connection.

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Communication in the early stage

Changes you may notice include:

- Difficulty finding the right words.
- Taking longer to speak or respond.
- Withdrawing from conversations.
- Struggling with decision-making or problem-solving.

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Martha Tierney, LCSW, is Associate Director of Research Volunteer Programs for the National Office of the Alzheimer's Association.

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Communication in the early stage

To connect:

- Ask directly how to help with communication.
- Keep sentences clear and straightforward.
- Leave plenty of time for conversations.
- Include the person in conversations that affect him or her, including planning for the future.



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Communication in the early stage

Changes you may notice include:

- Increased difficulty finding the right words.
- Using familiar words repeatedly.
- Inventing new words to describe familiar things.
- Easily losing train of thought.
- Speaking less frequently.

Consult a doctor when you notice major or sudden changes.

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Beverly is a caregiver support group facilitator whose husband has Alzheimer's disease.

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Communication in the middle stage

To connect, approach the person gently.

- Approach from the front, say who you are and call the person by name.
- Maintain eye contact and get at eye level if seated or reclining.
- Avoid criticizing, correcting and arguing.
- Pay attention to your tone.
- Take your time.



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Rebecca's mother had Alzheimer's disease.

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Communication in the middle stage

To connect, join the person's reality

- Keep respect and empathy in your mind, then:
 - Assess the person's needs.
 - Let the person know you hear him or her.
 - Provide a brief answer.
 - Respond to the emotions behind the statement.

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Communication in the middle stage

To connect, keep it slow and specific.

- Use short sentences and basic words.
- Speak more slowly and clearly, one person and one question at a time.
- Limit distractions.
- Keep it clear and be patient.
- Offer a guess or fill in words if acceptable.

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Communication in the middle stage

To connect, give multiple cues.

- Provide visual cues and gestures.
- Avoid sudden movement.
- Write things down for the person.
- Put answers into your questions.
- Repeat as needed.
- Turn negatives into positives.
- Avoid quizzing.



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Communication in the middle stage

To connect, respond empathically and reassure.

- Join the person's reality.
- Provide reassurance that you hear and understand.
- Focus on the feelings, not the facts.
- Validate and redirect the person if necessary.

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Communication in the late stage

Changes you may notice include:

- Communication is reduced to a few words or sounds.
- Possible responses to familiar words or phrases.

To connect:

- Listen for expressions of pain and respond promptly.
- Help the person feel safe and happy.
- Continue to bring respect to each conversation.
- Keep talking.
- Use all five senses to communicate.

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Communication in the late stage


Connect through touch.


- Feel different fabrics.
- Identify shapes by touch.
- Give lotion hand massages.
- Identify everyday items in a bag by touch.
- Visit with animals.
- Sculpt using non-toxic materials.



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A portrait of a woman with short, dark hair, wearing a blue button-down shirt and a necklace. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

 Sandra's mother is in the late stage of Alzheimer's disease.

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Communication in the late stage

Connect through sight.

- Laminate pictures of things that were interesting to the person to look at together.
- Watch videos of animals, nature or travel.
- Look at photo albums together.
- View photos of famous paintings, favorite settings or prominent people from the past.
- Go bird-watching or visit an aquarium.
- Paint with watercolors.
- Go outdoors or sit by an open window together.

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Communication in the late stage

Connect through sound.

- Listen to familiar music.
- Listen to recordings of the sounds of nature, farms, cities, or animals.
- Identify musical instruments by sound.
- Listen to songs or speech in the person's native language.
- Read books, poetry, scripture, or newspaper articles to the person.
- Let the person hear the gentle tone of your voice.

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Communication in the late stage

Connect through smell.

- Make small plastic bags containing items for the person to smell, such as:
 - Herbs or spices.
 - Cotton balls dipped in essential oils.
 - Grass clippings.
 - Fragrant flowers.
 - Teas or coffee beans.
- Use fragrant lotions for hand massages.
- Cook or feed the person foods that smell good, such as apple pie or chicken soup.

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Communication in the late stage

Connect through taste.

- Favorite foods.
- Home-baked goodies.
- Popsicles.
- Flavored drinks.
- Ice creams and puddings.



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Communication in all stages of the disease

- Join the person's reality to connect.
- Understand and accept what you can and cannot change.
- Remember that the person retains a sense of self despite the losses of the disease.
- Demonstrate respect and connect through feelings.
- Always treat the person as the adult he or she is.
- Try to decode the person's communications.
- Recognize the effects of your mood and actions.
- Try to understand the source of reactions.
- Help meet the needs while soothing and calming the person.

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Sam Fazio, Ph.D., is the Director of Special Projects for the National Office of the Alzheimer's Association.

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Resources can help

Get reliable information and resources at alz.org/care:

- **Caregiver Center**
Visit and get information, links and resources.
- **Alzheimer's Navigator**
Create customized portfolio of resources.
- **ALZConnected**
Connect with others via online message boards.
- **Community Resource Finder**
Find local dementia-related resources.
- **E-learning courses**
Learn any time with online education programs.

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Questions?

We're here. All day, every day.

24/7 Helpline: 800.272.3900
alz.org®

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