

Healthy Thoughts: Caring for a Family Member with Dementia

Provided by ERH Parish Health Ministry

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“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. (Hosea 4:6)

How does dementia affect communication?

As you care for your loved one, you may recognize some of the following gradual changes:

- Difficulty finding the correct words
- Creating new words for ones that are forgotten
- Repetition or overusing a word or phrase
- Trouble organizing words into logical sentences
- Cursing or using other offensive language
- Diminished speech

How can you help a loved one that has dementia?

- Show patience and avoid outpacing. Outpacing is when we provide information or choices too quickly for someone to process, then expect the person to react faster than he or she is able. An example of outpacing is, “Do you want to wear the brown slacks with the tan shirt, the black slacks with the grey shirt, or the grey slacks with the blue shirt?” This is an example of giving too much information, and giving it too quickly! Allow extra time to accomplish tasks such as dressing or responding to a question.
- Focus on the positive. Criticizing or correcting is nonproductive and may lead to yelling, crying, or striking out. Instead, try to focus on what your loved one has said and try to find the meaning in his or her message. When a loved one is unable to find meaning, redirect or simply change the subject.
- Avoid arguing. Try not to argue about unimportant things, such as the correct date. Reality Orientation, or informing a loved one of the correct date and time, is not effective and can cause your loved one to become agitated. If you don’t agree with, or

are offended by, a statement made by your loved one, let it go.

- Reduce distractions. Background distractions, such as television, noise, or nearby conversations can compete for attention and impair conversations.
- Become a creative listener. Pay attention to verbal and nonverbal communications. Persons with dementia will often communicate with family through their behaviors and expressions of emotion. Look at the emotional meaning behind statements made by a person with dementia.
- Use simple, direct statements. Since persons with dementia are only able to focus on one thought at a time, multi-step instructions may lead to confusion.
- Remain calm. Remember, people with dementia often react more to our feelings than our words. Although they may not be able to remember who you are, they can sense when you are upset. Finding ways to remain calm can help you gain cooperation.
- Recognize your limitations. When communication is breaking down, or you are too frustrated, turn on some music, or try to recall a favorite prayer or time in your lives.



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