

# PARK SLOPE *Courier*

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## ELDERCARE TODAY



Communicating with a loved one who has Alzheimer's or dementia can be frustrating, but caregivers must remember to be patient, show empathy, and not argue. iStock

## Communicating with someone who has Alzheimer's or dementia

**L**et's face it, communicating with someone who has Alzheimer's or dementia is tough, particularly as the disease progresses and as changes in the brain make it difficult for the person to speak and understand even the simplest of words or ideas. When I was caring for my mother, communication problems caused us both confusion and stress. But, once I mastered a few basic guidelines, our time together was less frustrating and more enjoyable for both of us.



### *Care Chronicle*

Lou-Ellen Barkan

ing props can be helpful. One nice way to start a conversation is to remind a person of her accomplishments or enjoyable experiences in her past. I enjoyed showing my mother pictures of

The first rule of communicating with someone who has dementia is to be patient, show empathy, and, above all, don't argue. Regardless of the ability to express himself clearly, a person living with Alzheimer's has feelings and emotions. No matter how frustrated you may be with his or her inability to express themselves clearly, with constant repetition or with language that doesn't make sense, keep the tone of your response calm.

Listen for clues as to what your family member might be trying to say. For instance, "I want the picture box" might mean, "Turn on the television." Avoid interrupting, correcting, or criticizing when he says something "wrong."

Always maintain eye contact when you're listening or speaking to someone with Alzheimer's or dementia, and try to sit or stand at their eye level. As the disease progresses, it will become more and more important to have close physical proximity for communication. For example, you may need to sit only a few inches away from someone in the later stages of the disease. Use physical touch, like a hand on their shoulder, to gently get their attention if it's appropriate. Speak slowly and clearly in a normal tone of voice at a normal volume. Try to sit together in a quiet, calm environment and minimize potential distractions like a TV or radio.

When speaking to someone with dementia, use brief and simple sentences of no more than five words and keep it to one basic idea per sentence. Be specific about what you're discussing. Us-

the family on my iPad and playing big band music, her favorite, while we sat together.

If the person you are caring for can't remember something, avoid quizzing him or pushing him to "try" to remember. It's okay to offer to help a person with Alzheimer's if he is trying to say or think of something, but avoid finishing his sentences for him. If someone else is present, avoid speaking about the person with dementia in the third person, as if she can't hear you.

Be prepared to repeat yourself without getting frustrated or impatient. People with Alzheimer's appreciate and deserve a calm and supportive attitude from others, even in the face of very challenging circumstances. Although someone with Alzheimer's may not know why you are frustrated, he can certainly pick up on your tone and body language. Remember, you can also communicate love, support, kindness, and care without language. Facial expressions, behavior, and physical demeanor all send dramatic and positive messages.

Caring for someone with Alzheimer's and dementia is often the hardest job anyone will have to do, but preparing yourself with the skills necessary to succeed will make both your and his life a little easier.

*For information about communications skills and other free caregiving resources and programs, call Caring-Kind's free 24-hour Helpline at (646) 744-2900 or visit [www.caringkindnyc.org](http://www.caringkindnyc.org).*

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