

Care Partner

Tips for interacting with people living with dementia

Do not contradict, correct, criticize, or confront. (Being kind is more important than being “right”).

Enhance sense of security and well-being by going along with what feels real to them rather than insisting they re-orient to your reality. (This is the best coping mechanism they have to put familiar context to the feelings they are experiencing).

Make them the experts-talk about what they know well to help build confidence and ease. Pay attention to their repeated questions for insight into what is important to them. Answer the emotional need underlying the questions. “What time is the appointment?” “9:00. I’ll make sure we’re not late.”

Encourage participation in activities and use of skills that remain as long as they can be performed with relative safety. Pace activities to accommodate energy levels.

Note changes in judgment, perception, vision, hearing, skills, and behavior. All behavior has meaning.

Try to connect on emotional and spiritual levels with the goal of producing contentment and dignity.

Initiate casual conversations and activities to enjoy together, as well as critical conversations related to advance directives and legal matters while still able to communicate wishes.

Avoid asking questions but rather communicate in ways that encourage, but don’t require a response. Reword questions with “I wonder if...I suppose...it seems...” vs. using direct questions which can feel like interrogation. “I suppose we need to get the garbage out.” vs. “Did you take out the garbage?”

Communicate your loved one’s preferences and needs to others, including routines, area of expertise, repetitive questions and responses which produce the highest sense of well-being, and music preferences (favorite songs) to develop playlist of important music for your loved one to listen to.

Aim for decrease/elimination of anxiety by listening and responding to the message behind the words and actions before trying to redirect to enjoyable activities. (Actual “facts” become less important than feelings as dementia progresses). With challenging situations, use the mantra:

AGREE (avoid actively disagreeing), APOLOGIZE, ALIGN (“join the club”), ATTRACT (to something better).

Realize it is now YOU who has to do the changing. You will require support from others to avoid isolation and exhaustion as you learn to embrace repetition of what works and avoid unrealistic expectations. Typically, if you are wondering if it’s time to hire extra help, it IS time to hire extra help.

Express your own needs to people who can help you cope, find humor, and learn to create joyful moments in your day (support groups, memory cafes, Contented Dementia classes and workshops).