

# **Understanding Persons with Alzheimer's Disease**

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## **Points to remember in dealing with a person affected by Alzheimer's**

- The care you provide must be person-centered care.
- You can change the environment. You can change the caregiver. You cannot change the person with Alzheimer's Disease.
- If you want to gain control, you have to give up control!
- 90% of what caregivers perceive as behavior problems are the result of an unmet need, a problem in the environment, or an inability of the caregiver to interpret what is being communicated.

“It's important to know what person the disease has, not what disease the person has.”

Sir William Osler, 1849-1919

“The best prescription we have in treating individuals with Alzheimer’s Disease is the caregivers. We are their best medicine.”

Dr. Anderson, neurologist, University of Iowa

“Creativity is 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration!”

Thomas Edison

“Go for singles rather than home runs. They’re a lot easier to hit. Besides that, every four singles makes a homerun. And the bases are still loaded.”

Author unknown

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If you would like more information about this topic or would like to provide suggestions for future topics, please contact the Iowa Consortium for Applied Gerontology. Established in 2003 at the University of Northern Iowa, the Iowa Consortium for Applied Gerontology focuses on developing timely and accessible educational programs for Iowa communities. IaCAG provides services and

opportunities for Iowa's senior population, service providers, education professionals, businesses, students, and family caregivers. Visit [www.iacag.org](http://www.iacag.org) or call (319) 273-7961 for more information.



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The following are tips from the Alzheimer's Association's fact sheet, "Communicating for Success". Information is from *Providing Dementia Care: A Teaching Manual for Educators*.

## **Non-verbal strategies for effective communication**

1. Remember that your mood will be "mirrored" by the person with dementia. If you act rushed or tense, the person will often react to your stress and become anxious or agitated.
2. Approach the person from the front so that you don't startle them.
3. Establish eye contact when speaking.
4. Speak at eye level whenever possible. If the person is sitting, kneel or pull up a chair beside him.
5. Use gentle touch to calm or reassure a person. Be aware that someone who is unaccustomed to physical affection may be frightened by a hand on the arm, and touch should not be used with those people.
6. Point or demonstrate where you want the person to go, or what you want him to do.

Making the gesture of face washing will help when words no longer make sense. “Does it hurt here?” may be easier than, “Where does it hurt?”

## **Verbal strategies for effective communication**

1. Use a calm, gentle voice.
2. Call the person by name and identify yourself if necessary.
3. Use short, simple sentences. “Let’s walk to the dining room now.”
4. Speak slowly.
5. Eliminate distracting noises. Turn off the TV, close the door if there are voices in the next room.
6. Use familiar words: “Do you need to use the toilet?” instead of “Do you need to urinate?”
7. Give simple choices: “Would you like milk or coffee?” instead of “What would you like to drink?”
8. Give one instruction at a time. “Please sit down.” “Now let’s take off your shoes.”
9. Allow enough time for the person to respond. Repeat if necessary.

10. Remember that you are speaking to an adult, even when you are using simplified language. Even a very confused person understands a condescending or disrespectful tone.
11. Answer a frequently asked question a few times, using a calm voice, and try to respond to the underlying feeling. “We’ll have lunch at 12:00, Mr. Stevens, do you need a snack now?” or “Your son will be here for supper; let’s look at that handsome picture of him you have on the dresser.”

### **Common pitfalls to avoid**

1. Don’t talk louder when someone doesn’t understand...unless he is deaf.
2. Avoid commands or a demanding tone of voice. “You have to go to the activity room NOW” is likely to provoke rebellion in even the most complacent person.
3. Don’t ask questions that rely on memory. “Where does your daughter live?” can be a humiliating question if the person can’t remember the answer.

4. Don't argue. It may no longer be important if it's May or December, and it's more likely that you'll anger than convince the person. Mary Lucero, a well known Alzheimer's educator, compares caregiving with the hospitality business: the customer is always right!
5. Don't ask questions if you won't accept the answer. "Do you want to get up now?" or "Can you make the bed?"
6. Avoid long-winded logical explanations. Reassurance and praise are usually more successful than detailed reasoning. "You won't need any money in the dining room today; you've already paid."

### **When communication breaks down...**

1. Walk away and try again later. We can use short-term memory loss to help in some situations.
2. Try laughter to lighten the mood, as long as it is not teasing in tone.
3. Distract the person with a snack, a walk, or a favorite activity.