

# Compassionate Communication With People Who Have Memory Impairment

## What to Avoid:

- Don't reason.
- Don't argue.
- Don't remind them that they forget.
- Don't question recent memory.
- Don't take it personally!

## What to Do:

- Give short, one-sentence explanations
- Allow plenty of time for comprehension.
- Repeat instructions exactly the same way several times.
- Eliminate "but" from your vocabulary; substitute "nevertheless".
- Avoid insistence. Try again later.
- Agree with them or distract them to a different subject or activity.
- Accept the blame when something's wrong (even if it's a fantasy).
- Leave the room, if necessary, to avoid confrontations.
- Respond to the feelings rather than the words.
- Be patient, cheerful, and reassuring. Go with the flow.
- Practice 100% forgiveness, as memory loss progresses daily.

*Please elevate your level of generosity and graciousness*

## Examples of Compassionate Communication

<p><b><u>Don't Reason</u></b></p> <p><b>Person with dementia:</b> <i>"What doctor's appointment? There's nothing wrong with me."</i></p> <p><b>Don't: (reason)</b> <i>"You've been seeing the doctor Every three months for the last two years. It's written on the calendar and I told you about it yesterday and this morning."</i></p> <p><b>DO: (short explanation)</b> <i>"It's just a regular checkup. (accept blame) "I'm sorry I forgot to tell you."</i></p>	<p><b><u>Don't Question Recent Memory</u></b></p> <p><b>Person with dementia:</b> <i>"Hello, Mary. I see you've brought a friend with you."</i></p> <p><b>Don't:</b> (question memory) <i>"Hi Mom. You remember Eric, don't you? What did you do today?"</i></p> <p><b>Do:</b> (short explanation) <i>"Hi Mom. You look Wonderful! This is Eric. We work together."</i></p>
---	---

<p><b><u>Don't Argue</u></b></p> <p><b>Person with dementia:</b> <i>"I didn't write this check for \$500. Someone at the bank is forging my signature."</i></p> <p><b>Don't:</b> (argue) <i>"What? Don't be silly! The bank Wouldn't be forging your signature."</i></p> <p><b>Do:</b> (respond to feelings) <i>"That's a scary though."</i>  (reassure) <i>"I'll make sure they don't do that."</i>  (distract) <i>"Would you help me fold the towels?"</i></p>	<p><b><u>Don't take it personally</u></b></p> <p><b>Person with dementia:</b> <i>"Who are you? Where's my husband?"</i></p> <p><b>Don't:</b> (take is personally) <i>"What do you mean – who's your husband? I am."</i></p> <p><b>DO:</b> (go with the flow, reassure) <i>"He'll be home for dinner. (distract) "How about some milk and cookies? Would you like chocolate chip or oatmeal?"</i></p>
<p><b><u>Don't confront</u></b></p> <p><b>Person with dementia:</b> <i>"Nobody's going to make decisions for me. You can go now...and don't come back!"</i></p> <p><b>Don't:</b> (confront) <i>"I'm not going anywhere and you can't remember enough to make your own decisions."</i></p> <p><b>Do:</b> (accept blame or respond to feelings) <i>"I'm sorry This is a tough time."</i>  (reassure) <i>"You know what? Don has a new job. He's really excited about it."</i></p>	<p><b><u>Do repeat exactly</u></b></p> <p><b>Person with dementia:</b> <i>"I'm going to the store for a newspaper."</i></p> <p><b>Don't:</b> (repeat differently) <i>"Please put your shoes on...you'll need to put your shoes on."</i></p> <p><b>Do:</b> (repeat exactly) <i>"Please put your shoes On...Please put your shoes on."</i></p>
<p><b><u>Don't remind them they forget</u></b></p> <p><b>Person with dementia:</b> <i>"Joe hasn't called for a long time. I hope he's okay."</i></p> <p><b>Don't:</b> (remind) <i>"Joe called yesterday and you talked to him for 15 minutes."</i></p> <p><b>Do:</b> (reassure) <i>"You really like talking to Joe, don't you?"</i>  (distract)"Let's call him when we get back from our walk."</p>	<p><b><u>Do eliminate 'but'; substitute 'nevertheless'</u></b></p> <p><b>Person with dementia:</b> <i>"I'm not eating this. I hate chicken."</i></p> <p><b>Don't:</b> (say 'but') <i>"I know chicken's not your favorite food, but it's what we're having for dinner."</i></p> <p><b>Do:</b> (say 'nevertheless') <i>"I know chicken's not your favorite food, (smile) nevertheless I'd Appreciate it if you'd eat a little bit."</i></p>

## Remember...

- You can't control memory loss, only your reaction to it. *Compassionate communication will significantly heighten quality of life.*
- People with dementia are not crazy or lazy. They simply say and do things that seem normal due to their memory impairments. Forgive them...always. For example: they don't hide things; they protect them in safe places...and then forget. *Don't take 'stealing' accusations personally.*
- Their disability is memory loss. Asking them to remember is like asking a blind person to read. ("Did you take your pills?" "What did you do today?") *Don't ask and don't test memory.* A loss of this magnitude reduces the capacity to reason.
- Expecting them to be reasonable or to accept your conclusion is unrealistic. "You need a shower." "Day care will be fun." "You can't live alone.") *Don't try to reason or convince. Give a one-sentence explanation or search for creative solutions.* Memory loss produces unpredictable emotions, though, and behavior, which you can alleviate by resolving all issues peacefully. *Don't argue, contradict, confront, blame, or insist.*
- Reminders are rarely kind. They tell the person with dementia how disabled they are – over and over again. Reminders of the recent past imply "I remember, I'm okay; you don't, you're not." Ouch! *(If they're hungry, don't inform them they ate an hour ago, offer a snack or set a time to eat soon.)* Some days they may seem normal when they're actually living a different reality. Reminders won't bring them into yours. Note: For vascular dementia, giving clues may help recall. If it doesn't work, be kind...don't remind.
- Ethical dilemmas may occur. If, for instance, the person with dementia thinks a dear spouse is alive, and truthful reminders will create sadness, what should you do? To avoid distress, try these ways of kindness: 1) distract to another topic, 2) start a fun activity, or 3) reminisce about their spouse, "I was just thinking about \_\_\_\_\_. How did you two meet?" You might even try, "He's gone for a while. Let's take our walk now."
- Open-ended question ("Where shall we go?" "What do you want to eat/wear/do?") are surprisingly complex and create anxiety. *Give them a simple choice between two items or direct their choice, "You look great in the red blouse."*
- They are scared all the time. *Each person with dementia reacts differently to fear. They may become passive, uncooperative, hostile, angry, agitated, verbally abusive, or physically combative. They may even do them all at different times, or alternate between them. Anxiety compels them to resist changes in routine, even pleasant ones. Your goal is to reduce anxiety whenever possible. Also, they can't remember your reassurances. Keep repeating them!*

**Call the Alzheimer's Association 24/7 HELPLINE 1-800-272-3900, if you need suggestions on handling challenging situations.**

