

## Enhancing Communication

Communication is a critical aspect of providing care for seniors and people with disabilities. Communication is a basic human need used to connect with those around us. Communication is not the same as language, but it does consist of words, phrases, sentences, and nonverbal messages. When communication happens there is:

- A method to express yourself
- A partner to receive communication
- The ability to comprehend
- And, understand social rules

Individuals receiving support frequently have challenges with communication. Even when words are used there can still be difficulty expressing needs such as requesting a glass of water. One puzzling aspect of communication difficulties is the contrast between abilities within the same individual. For example, the individual may have long conversations or talk about complex topics but still has difficulty asking for basic wants and needs.

In particular, individuals with limited communication skills struggle answering questions. This can be seen when the individual responds to statements but tunes out when asked a question.

Many individuals with communication issues have something called a “processing delay”. A processing delay happens when the brain struggles to understand words or produce them and as a result it takes longer than normal to communicate. Processing delays can vary wildly from person to person. It may even vary from day to day in the same individual, where they are able to find the word some days but not others. Sometimes a processing delay is obvious and other times it is almost hidden. Whether it is obvious or hidden, when a processing delay happens communication is always difficult for the individual.

For those with communication challenges, adding stress to the interaction causes difficulties of crisis proportions. Some medical conditions also create this distress. Under these conditions, skills are reduced or completely deteriorate. One result, whether short term stress or long term medical issue, is extreme difficulty asking for:

- Basics such drink, food, pain relief and other needs
- Help with fear, stress, or a simple problem



## How to help:

- Be aware of voice tone with a soothing, lower voice being easier to hear.
- Speak clearly but not too loudly or it actually becomes harder to hear
- Use a relaxed tone of voice and body posture with friendly gestures
- Simplify and slow down the pace, if needed.
- Don't repeat till you have given a chance to respond: at least 45 seconds.
- Give directions in small distinct steps.
- Be an excellent listener with patience.
- Avoid questions but still give choices "tell me if you want \_\_\_\_ or for dinner tonight.
- Focus on what the individual says and try to find meaning in the message.
- Agree instead of argue. If you don't agree with -- or are offended by -- a statement made by the individual, just let it go.
- Offer alternatives. If the individual is really having difficulty finding the right words, it's OK to offer a guess as long as they want help.
- Even if the message is hard to understand; uncover the feelings by observing:
  - tone of voice
  - facial expressions
  - gestures
  - body language.
- Reduce distractions.
  - It's hard to communicate in chaotic environments.
  - Try to talk in a quiet, calm place.
  - Approach from the front
  - Be at their eye level if possible
  - Make sure that the individual is wearing a working hearing aid and/or clean glasses, if prescribed.
- Avoid slang and sarcasm.
- Avoid vague terms such as "Don't know", "Later", "Maybe".
- Keep promises!

## Final recommendations

*Regardless of how difficult communication becomes....people benefit from frequent communication from those who care for them. Most importantly, treat the individual with dignity and respect, regardless of how difficult communication becomes. The greatest gift we have to give is communication!*

