

Language and communication

This Help Sheet discusses aspects of language that may be challenging for people with younger onset dementia. It provides strategies for families and carers that may help to improve and encourage communication despite these difficulties.

Younger onset dementia can often cause difficulties in language and communication. Some of the changes that may occur include difficulty finding the right words, difficulty reading or writing, inability to understand abstract concepts, or talking but not making sense. Some suggestions for strategies to help cope with changes in language and communication are outlined below.

When a person with younger onset dementia cannot understand or cannot make themselves understood, it can be extremely frustrating and it may provoke anxiety and sometimes anger. Be aware of this and try to avoid misunderstandings by providing support.

Develop strategies to improve understanding

- Be patient and don't assume everything has been understood by the person with dementia.
- Use simple, clear language and allow the person thinking time and plenty of time to respond.
- If necessary, speak more slowly than usual, and if possible maintain eye-contact at all times.
- Try not to interrupt the person when they are speaking.
- Keep sentences brief. Only provide a small amount of information at once.
- Ask the person questions in a format that allows them to answer easily.
- Don't ask more than one question at once – let the person answer the first question before asking another.
- If the information provided is complex, it may help to ask the person to repeat the information in their own words, to ensure they have correctly understood it.

- Look for alternatives to spoken communication; for example, visual cues such as gestures, facial expressions, pointing, demonstrating or using pictures.

Seek ways to encourage communication and expression

- Ask the person with dementia what method of communication works best for them. For example, do they want to be prompted, or would they like more time?
- Encourage the person with younger onset dementia to communicate by demonstration, or use visual cues, such as photos, to describe an object, event or action.
- Try using a communication board such as a white board.
- Try using drawing and writing where verbal communication is becoming difficult. Encourage the use of a notepad. Try to write simple, short sentences in large writing.
- Give the person with younger onset dementia time to come up with a word or thought. If they are still struggling, try gently suggesting the word or idea you think they might be searching for. Sometimes a starting letter for a word may be enough to prompt the person to come up with the word themselves.
- Try describing the different features of an object, event or action to help prompt the person to remember a particular word.
- Try to stay focussed on the person with dementia when they are talking to you, maintaining eye-contact if you can so they know that you are listening.
- Gently prompt with specific questions 'who', 'what', or 'where' but be careful not to pressure the person too much.

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- Try to complete one topic before moving on to the next topic. Try not to shift back and forth between ideas in a conversation.
- Explain to key people (employers, teachers, friends, co-workers) the nature of the language difficulty and how they can help with communication.
- Don't be condescending. Having younger onset dementia does not automatically mean that the person is not aware of what is happening, or capable of speaking for themselves.

The Montessori approach to dementia care provides a set of key principles along with practical tips and advice that can help to improve communication and to maintain good relationships between a person with dementia and their carers. Dementia Australia's *Relate, Motivate, Appreciate: Montessori Resource Promoting Positive Interaction with People with Dementia* lists these principles, along with a large number of suggested activities and video demonstrations. These are available from your local Dementia Australia, or on the website: qualitydementiacare.org.au

FURTHER INFORMATION

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**, or visit our website at dementia.org.au



For language assistance phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**