

“Do You Remember?” And other things not to say to someone with dementia.

Whether you are a family member with a loved one who has dementia, or a caregiver in a facility, there are ways to improve the nature of communication with men and women who have this diagnosis. As a psychologist working on dementia units in nursing homes, I often hear family members say “Do you remember me?” or similar phrases to a loved one.

Someone with dementia might feel anxious and ashamed if he or she does not remember the person asking the question. There is a myth that “quizzing” someone with dementia will help him or her to retain memories, but this is not true. The “use it or lose it” mentality does not apply to memory function and people with dementia.

One hallmark of any dementia is the inability to form new memories. Over time, even more distant memories tend to erode. Even when done gently, trying to “prod” someone with dementia to remember past or current events/friends/family, can lead to stress, anxiety and even anger as the person struggles to remember when the ability to remember is going or gone.

Below are some communication approaches which may be helpful when talking with someone in various stages of memory loss:

- Stay in the present moment. Comment on things in the immediate environment (ex. “Look at how pretty these holiday decorations are!”) and talk about one thing at a time.
- Avoid asking the person questions about the past; rather, tell your own stories that don’t involve the person’s input (Ex. “I remember I loved chocolate ice cream when I was little.”)
- Avoid distractions. Don’t try to converse with a person with dementia if the environment is loud and/or chaotic. If the situation does not permit conversation, just sit quietly, make eye contact, smile, and provide other non-verbal soothing cues.
- One step only: If asking a person with dementia to do something active (ex. “Come with me, get in the car, we’re going to lunch.”) use one step commands with simple language (Ex. “Let’s get in the car now.”).
- Avoid arguing. If a person with dementia is confused, don’t argue about reality. Rather, accept what the person is saying and move on. (Ex. If a person with dementia believes she is going home, avoid saying “But this is your home now.” A better statement might be: “Okay. Let’s have some lunch first.”)

Enjoy your time together. No matter what stage of dementia a person is in, there is still quality time to be had. Staying present, in the moment, simple and upbeat will maximize time with a person suffering memory loss. Remember limitations, but don’t focus on them, and the time you spend will be less stressful and more enjoyable for all.