

Compassionate Communication

A Caregiver's Guide to Connecting with Dignity and Patience

What to Avoid

These approaches often increase anxiety and resistance

- Reasoning or long explanations
- Arguing or correcting their beliefs
- Confronting or challenging them directly
- Reminding them that they forget
- Testing or questioning recent memory
- Taking things personally

What Helps

These strategies build connection and reduce stress

- Give short, one sentence explanations
- Repeat instructions the same way each time
- Allow extra time for comprehension
- Agree with them or gently redirect
- Step away briefly to avoid confrontation
- Accept the blame when something is wrong (even if it is a fantasy)
- Respond to the feeling rather than the words
- Be patient, cheerful, and reassuring
- Be generous and gracious

Things to Keep in Mind

Reframe your understanding to reduce your own frustration

- **They are not crazy or lazy.** Their behavior is normal for someone with memory loss. If they were doing or saying things to deliberately aggravate you, they would have a different diagnosis.
- **Some days they seem normal but they are not.** Their reality is now different than yours, and you cannot change or control the disease. You can only control your reaction to what it does to them.
- **Their disability is memory loss.** They cannot remember, and they cannot remember that they cannot remember. They will ask the same question repeatedly, thinking it is the first time.
- **They do not hide things.** They “protect” them and then forget where they put them. Do not take it personally when they accuse you of stealing.
- **They live with constant fear.** Each person reacts differently to fear. They may become passive, uncooperative, hostile, angry, agitated, verbally abusive, physically combative, or clingy. They may do all of these at different times – or alternate between them.
- **They cannot remember your reassurances.** Repeat calming messages as often as needed.

Adapted from materials by Liz Ayers of the Alzheimer's Association. This guide is intended for caregiver education and nonprofit distribution. Always consult a healthcare professional for individualized medical guidance.



Quick Reference Examples

Situation: Resisting an appointment

Patient: "What doctor's appointment? There's nothing wrong with me."

Do not reason: "You've been seeing the doctor for the last two years. It's on the calendar, and I told you about it yesterday and this morning."

Do offer a short explanation: "It's just a regular check up."

Accept blame: "I'm sorry if I forgot to tell you."

Situation: Accusing of stealing

Patient: "I didn't write this check for \$500. Someone at the bank is forging my signature."

Do not argue: "What? Don't be silly! The bank wouldn't be forging your signature."

Do respond to feelings: "That's a scary thought."

Do reassure: "I'll make sure they don't do that."

Accept & redirect: "Will you help me fold the towels?"

Situation: Pushing caregiver away

Patient: "Nobody's going to make decisions for me."

Do not confront: "I'm not going anywhere, and you can't remember enough to make your own decisions."

Do respond to feelings: "I'm sorry this is a tough time."

Do reassure: "I love that we're going to get through this together."

Redirect: "You know what? Don has a new job. He's really excited about it!"

Situation: Saying a loved one hasn't called

Patient: "Joe hasn't called for a long time. I hope he is OK."

Do not remind: "Joe called yesterday, and you talked with him for 15 minutes."

Do reassure: "You really like talking to Joe don't you?"

Redirect: "Let's call him when we get back from our walk."

Situation: Forgetting a person

Patient: "Hello Mary. I see you've brought a friend with you."

Do not question memory: "Hi Mom! You remember Eric, don't you? What did you do today?"

Do short intro: "Hi Mom, you look wonderful! This is Eric. We work together."

Situation: Forgetting the caregiver

Patient: "Who are you? Where's my husband?"

Do not take it personally: "What do you mean - who's your husband? I am!"

Go with the flow and reassure: "He'll be late for dinner."

Do distract: "How about some milk and cookies. I'm going to have a chocolate chip cookie. Will you eat one with me?"

Situation: Needing reminding

Patient: "I'm going to the store for a newspaper."

Do not repeat differently: "Please put your shoes on. You'll need to put your shoes on."

Do repeat the same way: "Please put your shoes on. Please put your shoes on."

Situation: Refusing a meal

Patient: "I'm not eating this. I hate chicken."

Do not say "but": "I know chicken is not your favorite food, but it's what we're having for dinner."

Do say "nevertheless": "I know chicken is not your favorite food, (smile) nevertheless, I'd appreciate it if you'd eat a little bit with me!"