

# Keys to Caring

At Caregiver Support Network, dementia care is our passion. We know that caring for someone with cognitive impairment requires learning new skills and language. This publication includes hints and techniques that can improve quality of life and reduce caregiver stress. Please call us with your care questions. We are here to help!



**Caregiver**  
SUPPORT NETWORK  
HOME HEALTH & HOSPICE

BEST OF STATE 2008-2012  
HEALTHINSIGHT QUALITY AWARD 2006-2011

## Helpful Hints

- Learn everything you can about the disease and its medical and non-medical treatment.
- Build your team — family, friends, physicians and other medical providers, faith community, County Aging Services, etc.
- Attend a support group and/or connect with other families with similar challenges.
- Be on the lookout for ways to reduce stress in the environment for *both* the care receiver and the caregiver. Too much stress impairs the abilities of everyone involved.
- Suspect a medical reason, like an infection or illness, when abrupt behavior changes occur. Seek treatment immediately.
- Learn and use dementia-specific communication techniques like reminiscence, redirection, and validation.
- Do not correct or argue with people who have dementia. Simply agree, validate, and move on.
- Do not force any “confessions,” as in “You know you ... need help, have memory problems, can’t drive anymore, can’t do the things you used to do, etc.” The capacity for insight is often lost early in the disease. Instead, focus on positive solutions.
- Provide structure, routine, and consistent activities.
- Avoid making major changes and giving too much advance notice. Ease into transitions.
- Take good care of the person’s eyes and ears as well as other chronic conditions.
- Create a “no-fail” environment by adapting everyday activities so the person can engage successfully.
- Make safety adaptations as needed to the environment.
- Anticipate “sundowning” by providing exercise, ample sunlight, frequent snacks, and properly timed medication, if necessary.
- Know the non-verbal signs and symptoms of pain. Manage it, especially at night.
- Be a careful observer. Identify actions and events that “trigger” behaviors. Minimize or eliminate negative triggers; encourage and increase positive triggers.
- Make a wide range of purposeful activities available, including aerobic exercise.
- Respite! Get adequate time away from caregiving duties to rest and rejuvenate.
- Find the humor in the situation where possible.
- When in doubt, apply love.

## Compassionate Communication

### Do

- Do eliminate “but” from your vocabulary; substitute “nevertheless.”
- Do agree and distract to a different subject or activity.
- Do accept the blame when something is wrong (even if it’s fantasy).
- Do give short, one sentence explanations.
- Do allow plenty of time for comprehension.
- Do repeat instructions or sentences exactly the same way each time.
- Do be patient, cheerful, and reassuring. Go with the flow!
- Do continue to evaluate your level of generosity and graciousness.



### Don't

- Don't reason or try to use logic.
- Don't remind them they forget.
- Don't question recent memory.
- Don't take things personally.
- Don't argue.
- Don't confront.

*Adapted from Liz Ayres,  
Volunteer and Caregiver*

# Compassionate Communication

## *Don't Reason*

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**Patient:**

"What doctor's appointment? I am not sick!"

**DON'T reason:**

"You've been seeing the doctor every three months for the last two years. It's written on the calendar and I told you yesterday and this morning."

**DO give a short explanation:**

"It's just a regular check-up."

**DO accept blame:**

"I'm sorry if I forgot to tell you."

## *Don't Question Recent Memory*

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**Patient:**

"Hello, Susie. I see you've brought a friend with you."

**DON'T question memory:**

"Hi, Mom. You remember Eric, don't you? ...What did you do today?"

**DO reassure and give a short explanation:**

"Hi Mom. You look wonderful! This is Eric. We work together."

## *Don't Argue*

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**Patient:**

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

**DON'T argue:**

"What? Don't be silly! The bank wouldn't do that."

**DO respond to feelings and validate:**

"That's a scary thought."

**DO reassure:**

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

**DO distract:**

"Would you help me fold the towels?"

## *Don't Take Things Personally*

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**Patient:**

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

**DON'T take it personally:**

"What do you mean – who's your husband? I am."

**DO go with the flow and reassure:**

"I'm Dave. Tell me about your husband. How long have you been married?"

**DO distract:**

"How about some milk and cookies? Would you like chocolate chip or oatmeal?"

## *Don't Confront*

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**Patient:**

"Nobody's going to make decisions for me. You can go now... and don't come back!"

**DON'T confront:**

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

**DO accept blame and respond to feelings:**

"I'm sorry this is a tough time."

**DO reassure:**

"I love you and we're going to get through this together."

**DO distract:**

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

## *Don't Remind Them They Forget*

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**Patient:**

"Joe hasn't called for a long time. I hope he's okay."

**DON'T remind:**

"Joe called yesterday and you talked to him for 15 minutes."

**DO reassure:**

"You really like talking to Joe, don't you?"

**DO distract:**

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

## *Do Repeat Exactly*

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**Patient:**

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

**DON'T repeat differently:**

"Please put your shoes on." ... "You'll need to put your shoes on." ... "Don't forget your shoes!"

**DO repeat exactly:**

"Please put your shoes on." ... "Please put your shoes on."

## *Do Eliminate "But" and Substitute "Nevertheless"*

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**Patient:**

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

**DON'T say "but":**

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

**DO say "nevertheless":**

"I know chicken's not your favorite food (smile). Nevertheless, I'd appreciate it if you'd eat a little bit."

# The Importance of Reassurance

People with Alzheimer's disease and other dementia can experience anxiety, fear, and insecurity about what is happening to them and around them. It may feel like their world is unraveling. Sights and sounds that were once familiar don't make sense anymore. This can be frightening, frustrating, and depressing. Try to imagine what it would be like to go through what they are experiencing.

The consistent use of reassuring, affectionate words, phrases, and actions helps to ease these unpleasant feelings. Use every opportunity for sincere praise. Do not gloss over the negative emotions that a person may need to express, but do focus on the positive.

## Verbal Reassurance

- Use his or her name as often as possible.
- "I will take care of it."
- "You are very good at \_\_\_\_\_!" (telling stories, singing, helping, etc.)
- "You look so \_\_\_\_\_ today!" (bright, cheerful, pretty, energetic, etc.)
- "I love the way you \_\_\_\_\_." (smile, laugh, etc.)
- "I can tell you really care about \_\_\_\_\_." (nature, friends, kids, spouse, garden, home, faith, etc.)
- "I enjoy our time together."
- "You are so \_\_\_\_\_." (gracious, funny, sweet, caring, kind, easy to be with, etc.)
- "I look forward to seeing you again."
- "That was so interesting!"
- "You are safe here with me."

***Remember to employ every sense to reassure. As dementia progresses, the person relies more on the five senses to negotiate and interpret his or her environment.***



## Sight

It is important for the environment to be visually reassuring.

- Smile!
- Use and maintain eye contact.
- Make sure your body language communicates calm and acceptance.
- Eliminate exposure to violent images on TV or in print.
- Think feng shui! Is the environment inviting, bright, and clean?

## Sound

Achieve auditory reassurance by filling the environment with sounds that are relaxing, cheerful, and comforting.

- Use a calm and reassuring tone of voice. Let it project respect, patience, and caring.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Laugh! (At appropriate times—follow the person's lead.)
- Play music of the appropriate mood and era.
- Minimize loud noises and distractions.

## Smell

Smell is the most primal sense. Make sure the environment is pleasing to the nose.

- Bake cookies or favorite menu items.
- Use aroma therapy or potpourri.
- Keep up personal hygiene.
- Keep the environment odor-free.

## Touch

Appropriate touch is very useful in reassuring and comforting.

- Use reassuring touches like:
  - A pat on the arm or back.
  - Holding hands.
  - A back or foot rub.
  - Gently taking an arm when walking together.
  - Any other touch that feels comfortable and reassuring to you both.

## Taste

- Use comfort foods and make favorite recipes from childhood.
- Sweet is one of the most pleasant flavors for many of us.
- Use finger foods, introducing one at a time on small, colorful plates.

# The Power of Validation

The validation techniques pioneered by Naomi Feil give us a framework to communicate with empathy and respect. By being fully present with the person *where they are* instead of trying to reorient them to where we are provides security, comfort, and reduces stress for both parties. Go to [www.vfvalidation.org](http://www.vfvalidation.org) for more information.

Try the following techniques to see which work for you and your unique situation:

- **Centering** — Focus on breathing to expel as much frustration and anger as possible.
- **Use Non-threatening, Factual Words to Build Trust** — Avoid questions that deal with emotions. Do not ask “why.” Focus on concrete, factual questions: who, what, where, when, how.
- **Rephrase** — Repeat the gist of what the person has said, using the same key words, the same tone of voice, and the same rate of speech.
- **Use Polarity** — Ask the person to think about the most extreme example of his or her complaint or idea.

- **Imagine the Opposite** — Ask the person to imagine the opposite of the situation at hand. This helps distract from disturbing thoughts.
- **Reminiscence** — Exploring the past and re-establishing familiar coping methods help the disoriented person deal with present-day losses. Reminiscing can provide feelings of centeredness and security.
- **Use Ambiguity** — Confused people often use words that have no meaning to others. Respond by using pronouns like “they,” “he,” “she,” “it,” “someone,” and “something” to fill in for the non-dictionary words.
- **Maintain Genuine Eye Contact**
- **Use a Clear, Low, Loving Tone of Voice**
- **Match the Person’s Motions and Emotions (Mirroring)** — When the person paces, you pace; when they pound the table, you pound the table. This can communicate empathy and understanding.
- **Link the Behavior with the Un-met Human Need** — Most people need to be loved and nurtured, to be active and engaged, and to express their deep emotions to someone who listens with empathy. For example, when a person continually asks “what time is it?”, their un-met need might be having a purposeful activity to engage in.
- **Use Touch** — Touching another person is an intimate act. Respect that some people may not want to be touched. Ask permission before touching and respect personal space.
- **Use Music** — When words have gone, familiar and early-learned melodies can remain.



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