

COMMUNICATING WITH A PERSON WHO HAS ADVANCED DEMENTIA

WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

Dementia is an umbrella term used to describe many conditions which affect memory, planning skills, use of language, mood and behaviour. Some of the most common forms of Dementia include: Alzheimer's Disease, Vascular Dementia, Lewy Body Dementia, and Fronto-temporal Dementia.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES TO ASSIST A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA TO COMMUNICATE

- Use the **person's name to get their attention** before you start speaking.
- Use short and simple sentences. Focus on **key words** (i.e. words which carry information in a sentence).
- **Look** at the person while you are speaking to them.
- **Slow down** and speak at a slightly slower pace. **Pause** between each sentence so the person has a chance to process the information. These pauses may feel unnatural to you, however the person with Dementia is likely to find them very helpful.
- Make it very clear if you change topic e.g. *"John we are talking about XYZ"*.
- If giving the person a choice of options, **try and avoid open ended questions** such as *"What would you like to do for the afternoon?"*; instead you could ask *"Would you like to listen to music or go for a walk?"*. Keep language **simple and direct**.
- If conversing with the person about themselves or their past, it may be helpful to **make comments or suggestions** instead of asking questions e.g. *"John might like to tell us about his family"* which John can then comment on if he chooses (rather than asking *"How many children do you have?"* which may cause anxiety for the person if she/he cannot remember).
- **Humour** can be a great way to break the barriers and reduce the person's anxiety. Try and avoid use of sarcasm which may be misinterpreted. It is very important to ensure you are using humour in an appropriate manner and that the person does not feel you are laughing at them.
- Use lots of **non-verbal communication** to help e.g. pointing, use of actions or gesture, use of visual communication boards. You can find examples of communication/letter boards on our website: nutricia.ie.
- A person with Dementia may repeatedly ask questions which you find challenging to answer such as *"Where is (name of someone that may have passed away)?"* or *"Can I go home?"* Rather than saying *"No/I don't know"*, it can be helpful to continue that conversation and **allow the person to reminisce** e.g. *"Your home sounds nice, what does it look like?"* or *"What would you like to do when you go home?"* or *"X sounds like a nice person, when did you last see them?"*.



HELPFUL STRATEGIES TO ASSIST A PERSON WITH DEMENTIA TO COMMUNICATE (continued)

- If the person is upset or anxious, **reassure** the person that they are safe and ensure they feel heard by responding to them. Try and **redirect** the person's attention with an activity they enjoy or a new topic of conversation.
- For some people, if they are anxious it can be helpful to ask them an open ended question about the past which could be enjoyable for them to reminisce. Other people may find this upsetting, so **ensure to get to know the person first or ask their family members what works** to reduce their anxiety. It can be helpful to **create a memory book** for the person to look through. This can contain photos of family members, information about places they enjoyed visiting etc.



- If the person repeatedly asks the same question, try and discover the meaning behind their communication. For example, are they feeling bored or lonely and that question is their way of initiating conversation? If they are asking to see a family member, are they feeling scared or sad? **Try and identify and address the underlying feelings or emotions.**
- **Routine** can be important for a person with Dementia. They may be more comfortable eating their meals at the same place in the dining room or sitting in the same chair, so try and take this into consideration as much as possible.



Please visit [isti.ie](https://www.isti.ie) to locate a Speech and Language Therapist near you.

You can also visit [nutricia.ie](https://www.nutricia.ie),
email nutriciacare@nutricia.com or
Freephone 1800 923 404 for more information.