

**A COMMON SENSE APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION –  
DEALING WITH ALZHEIMER’S  
By the Ramsey Foundation**

- I. Characteristics of Persons with Alzheimer’s disease
  - A. Short Term memory loss, social withdrawal, increased self absorption
  - B. Difficulties with language – inability to find correct word
  - C. Problems with judgment, planning, reasoning, abstract thinking
  - D. Inability to learn new things
  - E. Loss of inhibitions/impulse control, personality changes
  
- II. Communication Suggestions
  - A. Verbal Communication
    - 1. Identify yourself
    - 2. Use direct eye contact
    - 3. Use a clear, calm voice – don’t shout, speak slowly
    - 4. Eliminate background noise like radio or television
    - 5. Use short, simple sentences
    - 6. Break task requests into smaller steps
    - 7. Ask “yes” or “no” questions. Do not ask “why”
    - 8. Use work cues. Try to figure out what the person is trying to say and ask if you are correct (e.g., Don’t ask, “What do you want?”. Ask, “Do you want the milk?”)
  
  - B. Written Communication
    - 1. Label the environment (e.g., put names on rooms in the home)
    - 2. Post a daily schedule
    - 3. Use notes as reminders
  
  - C. Body Language
    - 1. Use an open, gentle approach
    - 2. Use a gentle guiding touch
    - 3. Approach the person from the front, never from behind
    - 4. Hold out an item to the person if you want them to use it
    - 5. Wave goodbye when leaving
    - 6. Use expressions of concern
    - 7. Nod your head
  
- III. Behavioral Changes
  - A. Agitation
  - B. Anxiety – person asks the same question over and over, paces, rummages, or wrings his/her hands
  - C. Resistance/Combativeness – person is fearful or displays paranoid behaviors or suspicion and accusation.
  
  - D. Inappropriate sexual or other comments without inhibitions

- E. Hallucinations
  - F. Night time wakefulness and/or sun downing and/or shadowing
  - G. Withdrawal
- IV. Ways of Coping with Behavioral Changes
- A. Reduce fatigue (naps in a recliner help)
  - B. Alleviate boredom (give the person simple tasks)
  - C. Keep the schedule the same every day
  - D. When going out, bring along familiar items
  - E. Keep the person's activities consistent with his/her past patterns
  - F. Keep choices simple – one choice is enough – don't ask a person to do something beyond their capabilities
  - G. Avoid sudden changes of pace – take everything in steps
  - H. Reduce stimuli (or things that can agitate) in the home setting
  - I. Avoid large crowds
  - J. Limit questions and length of conversations
  - K. Reminisce with the person
- V. Response to Crisis – The Five R's
- A. Remain calm
  - B. Respond to the person's feelings
  - C. Reassure the person
  - D. Remove yourself temporarily from the situation
  - E. Return
- VI. Other Suggestions
- A. Allow person to pace, don't try to restrain him/her
  - B. Keep a current photo of person
  - C. Have person wear an ID bracelet if possible

## *8 Communication Techniques To Use With People with Alzheimer's*

1. Identify Yourself
2. Use Eye Contact
3. Use a Calm Voice
4. Eliminate Background Noise
5. Use Short Sentences
6. Use One Step Commands
7. Ask Yes or No Questions
8. Use Word Cues

Source: A Common Sense Approach to Communication. Karen Feldt. St. Paul Ramsey Medical Center, 1990.

## How to Be an ACTIVE Listener

1. Find a purpose for listening.
2. Look at the speaker.
3. Give the speaker your whole attention.
4. Think about what you are hearing.
5. Ask questions to clarify meaning or feeling.
6. Never interrupt the speaker.
7. Listen for main ideas.
8. Avoid distractions.
9. Listen with concentrated attention from beginning to end.
10. Examine ideas by mentally summarizing and outlining key points.
11. Anticipate what the speaker might say, but don't assume you know what he/she is going to say.
12. Respond positively to let the speaker know you are listening carefully.
13. Review what you hear in order to better understand and remember.

## **HOW TO BE A FRIEND TO A DISABLED PERSON**

It can be difficult to know how best to be a friend to a disabled person. Courage Center offers the following suggestions:

- Be yourself. Treat a person with a disability as you would anyone else you meet.
- Ask a disabled person if he or she would like some help. Then wait to see if the person wants it.
- Talk directly to the disabled person. Do not ask questions about the disabled person of the friend that is with him or her.
- If some person has a speech problem and is hard to understand, keep asking him or her to repeat what he said until you understand him. That person wants to be friends and wants to know you too.
- A person with a hearing disability may not know that you are talking to him or her, so if he doesn't respond to you he is not being rude.
- Speak clearly and slowly to a hearing impaired person. Do not shout or overdo the movement of your mouth.
- Do not pet "seeing eye" dogs when they are wearing their harnesses. The dog is working at that time so he cannot play.
- Do not talk loud to a blind person. Just because he cannot see doesn't mean he cannot hear.
- Be patient with the extra time needed for a disabled person to do or say things.
- Have fun getting to know a person with a disability. They like the same things you do but may do things differently.

## Dealing with Disability

### *Please – Talk to Me as an Adult*

By Bluma Tepper

*The following is one woman's perspective on dealing with a disability. Many of her feelings may be shared by individuals with a variety of conditions; others are unique to her situation. We invite you to share your perspectives on dealing with disability. Understanding one another is a step toward acceptance by the world at large.*

I was humiliated by the doctor's office. My husband had explained that I was blind and hard of hearing, whereupon our doctor proceeded to carry on all conversation with my husband, asking questions, presenting findings of his examination. The interview ended with the doctor patting me on the head and assuring me that I would be fine. Furious, I replied, "I *am* fine, mentally and physically!" Out of the experience came the realization that, while most people do not intend to hurt or humiliate, they do not understand.

I am an 83-year-old blind woman. I was sighted for 80 years, during 13 of which I was a member of Light House of New York. Although I was a volunteer, I had minimal contact with blind people. My feelings about blind people then were altogether different from what they are now. I am sure I did and said the wrong things while trying to be helpful, only because I did not know.

Now things are entirely different. For two years I had progressive loss of vision...now I have been blind for one year. With it came the usual anger and frustration, and then finally the reality: "It is here to stay – learn to live with it!"

However, one thing I didn't expect, nor can I fully understand, is why people's attitudes toward me changed. No, I am not overly sensitive, nor am I easily offended by a thoughtless word...

I know I lost a vital part of my body. I lost my eyes' ability to see. But that is all I lost. I am still in full command of my mental faculties, so why am I being treated like my mind went with my vision?

During the last year, I have had occasion to talk with a number of blind people, all seniors, who feel as I do – victims of unintentional rejection, a misunderstood segment of the population. People feel uncomfortable with us for no other reason than that they don't know what to say or how to say it.

Understanding how to deal with us will make people more relaxed and comfortable with us, and for us, easier to be with them. I would like to offer some suggestions to help make daily living easier.

Please include me in your group, whether it is a serious discussion or just a friendly social gathering. I am interested in your ideas on any subject under discussion, and perhaps you would like to hear mine also.

I like being with people, and enjoy the laughter and friendly conversation. Laughter is such good medicine, so reach out to me and include me. I don't like to be pushy and intrude, even if I could see.

I like doing things the easiest possibly way. When it works, I feel efficient, and that is important to me. I have found easy ways to do old familiar things.

I find it easier to handle finger-size pieces of cake, a sandwich cut in thirds or quarters instead of the customary half, a tossed green salad of bite-sized vegetables rather than a large leaf of lettuce which covers half your face and is hard to get into your mouth (to say nothing of what the dressing does). Ice cream is easier to handle if I let it soften a bit. Emily Post or Amy Vanderbilt will never approve, but I find it easy to use a teaspoon to scoop up

peas, corn, and cooked mixed vegetables, because it does not help my digestion or patience as time after time I come up with an empty fork.

Patting me on the head, telling me "Good girl, you are taking it so bravely," devastates me. Saying to me, "I'll tell you what to do," insults me. Asking me, "What would you like to do? Which do you prefer?" helps me feel I am making decisions.

No matter how self-sufficient and independent I try to be, I know that I need help. I appreciate the assistance I get and am grateful to the kind people who are always ready to help. It is very important for a person to feel that he can make decisions and be in command of his actions. So please, talk to me as an adult.

- Horizons, March 1988

# Empathy

**Empathy is the following:**

- 1. The process of grasping or understanding the other person's point of view**
- 2. Putting yourself in his/her shoes**
- 3. Viewing a situation or idea through his/her "filter"**

It is non-judgmental. It can be one of the most valuable, powerful characteristics you can develop to strengthen interpersonal relations and communication.

We all practice EMPATHY to some degree, but most of us can extend its use to other areas of our lives and make it an increasingly automatic habit.

**Clarification of Empathy:**

SYMPATHY, on one hand, means the capacity to think or feel alike with another. EMPATHY, on the other hand, can be deeper. It does not necessarily involve agreement with the other person's viewpoint, but the development of an increasingly clear understanding of the way that person is seeing and feeling about the situation.

**Steps:**

There are three definite steps in the practice of EMPATHY. As it becomes a more automatic habit, the three steps flow in a smooth fluid sequence, but it is helpful for us to recognize and understand each stage.

1. Recognize that every person in the world has his/her own personal, unique, individual filter through which he/she perceives reality. It is made up of childhood training, personality, attitudes, prejudices, education and countless experiences.
2. Accept this fact of individuality as a good system. Be willing to allow the other person the right to be him/herself and to see reality in his/her own way. This does not mean you should necessarily like the other person's point of view – just that you do not insist that everyone think exactly as you do. It is extremely important to recognize your own personal biases in this step.
3. Only to the degree that the first two steps have been taken can one proceed to crawl into another's filter to see how the world looks from there. This can never be done perfectly because we can never completely set aside our own point of view. But, the entire process of communication between human beings can certainly be strengthened and enriched if those communicating understand the elements of the filter mechanisms.

You will find that as EMPATHY becomes a habit, your ability to relate effectively with people to motivate them and to achieve your goals in life will be multiplied many times over. These steps are appropriate in your relationships with your employers or employees, spouses, children, parents, friends, and people of other religious, cultures, political positions and races.

## **SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES DURING RESPITE VISITS**

- Listen – reassure and compliment freely
- Listen to memories about childhood or schooling
- Listen to music or tapes
- Listen and watch videos or TV
- Play simple card games
- Play checkers or other board games
- Write letters or notes to family
- Read magazines, poetry, letters or short stories
- Assist with making crafts
- Play with pets
- Read books with pictures – talk about the pictures
- Look at old photos
- Make or eat snacks
- Listen to the sounds of nature
- Watch the clouds, sky or storm
- Do indoor/outdoor gardening
- Compliment or tell someone something was well done
- Sing and/or play musical instruments
- Go outside to observe nature
- Do simple puzzles, crosswords or word games
- Laugh

## Making the Most of Your Visit

Not being known by someone who is the center of your world; not being able to recognize the person you once idolized; seeing a completely new and strange person replace someone who was once so familiar to you - coping with the changes that the effects of Alzheimer's can have on a loved one can be quite challenging.

Not only is it hard to accept the changes that you see happening before your very eyes, it is hard to understand how to deal with those changes. However, accept and understand you must, because at the end of the day, that person is still your grandparent, your parent, a dear friend, *OR* someone else who you hold near and dear to your heart.



Part of the battle of successfully coping is understanding what to expect. You want to make the most of your time with this person, but feeling overwhelmed and unable to process the changed person that you see before you is natural.

In order to make the most of your visit with a loved one with Alzheimer's, prepare yourself so that you can enjoy your time together as much as possible.

### **Be Knowledgeable**

You have the image of your jovial grandfather in mind, but upon visiting him, you are startled to find how much he has changed. In order to avoid feeling overwhelmed, be knowledgeable about the changes that you will likely experience. He or she may not know who you are, may become easily upset, or may think you are someone else. Knowing to expect this type of experience can allow you to respond in a positive way, ensuring your visit is a successful one.

#### **Offer a Greeting**

If your mother has Alzheimer's, you know that her not knowing or recognizing you is not abnormal. By offering a warm greeting and introducing yourself, you offer her the chance to place who you are and set the stage for a successful meeting. Those with Alzheimer's tend to crave physical touch, so offer a warm hug or hold their hand as you sit together.

### **Be Courteous**

Though your loved one may be forgetful and may even act childish in some ways, always treat him with respect. Never belittle or talk down to him. He is a person who has lived a full life and is battling a very difficult disease. Show your respect and be courteous - although they may not be able to show their appreciation, it's very important.

### **Don't Overwhelm**

Sharing too much at one time with your loved one is often overwhelming for them. Pick and choose what you want to say, or talk about, and pay attention to their physical cues. When you notice them becoming tired or irritable, it's okay to simply sit quietly.

### **Show Your Love and Support**

Even if your loved one never gains a sense of who you are during your entire visit, show her your love and support anyway. Your loved one can sense your emotions, and those emotions will greatly impact her long after you leave. In fact, she may associate those emotions with you the next time you visit, so be sure to leave things on a calm and positive note.

### **Don't Get Upset**

Naturally, the changes Alzheimer's brings to your loved one are difficult and hard to deal with. However, don't let your frustrations get the best of you! This will make the visit more difficult for everyone, perhaps leading to more discouraging visits in the future.