

Australian version

# iSupport For Dementia

Training and support manual  
for carers of people with dementia



## Unit 2. Improving communication

### Improving communication

#### Why is this unit important?

Dementia can often make communication difficult.

#### How will this unit help me?

This unit helps you to talk in a simple and direct way and show your compassion in everyday situations.

#### What will I learn?

- To check the ability to hear and see
- To get attention in a respectful way
- To keep it simple
- To take the person seriously
- To pay attention to reactions
- To give compliments
- To show compassion.

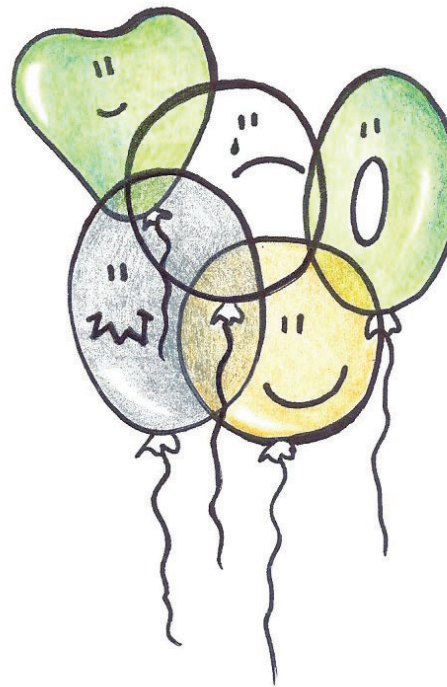
### How to improve communication?

In this unit, you will receive tools and tips for good communication. Dementia can often make communication difficult.

**This can have an impact on your relationship with the person you care for.**

It can even make the person you care for or you frustrated, sad, or angry.

When you communicate with the person you care for, for example by talking or giving a hug, make sure the person you care for understands what you mean by your action and that you understand the person you care for too.



### 1. Show compassion

It is important that you show compassion, even if a person living with dementia is repeating the same questions over and over again, or understanding each other becomes increasingly difficult.

In this unit we help you to show your compassion. Some important basic skills for communication will be explained.

Check your understanding

?

*Imagine for a moment that you are living with dementia. What would you like other people to do?*

☐

Listen to how you feel

☐

Talk behind your back

☐

Give you a smile

☐

Say they do not care

☐

Tell you they love you

☐

Treat you like a child

☐

Approach you with respect and dignity.

Check your understanding

?

✓

Listen to how you feel

✗

Talk behind your back

✓

Give you a smile

✗

Say they do not care

✓

Tell you they love you

✗

Treat you like a child

✓

Approach you with respect and dignity.

## 2. Check ability to hear and see

For all communication - talking, touching, or gestures - the basics, like the ability to see and hear, are important.

Unfortunately, dementia may impair someone's ability to hear and see.

Therefore, it is important that you check if their hearing and sight could be improved by you making changes in their environment or arranging for any relevant medical check-ups.





1. Activity



To help improve sight

Check the following:

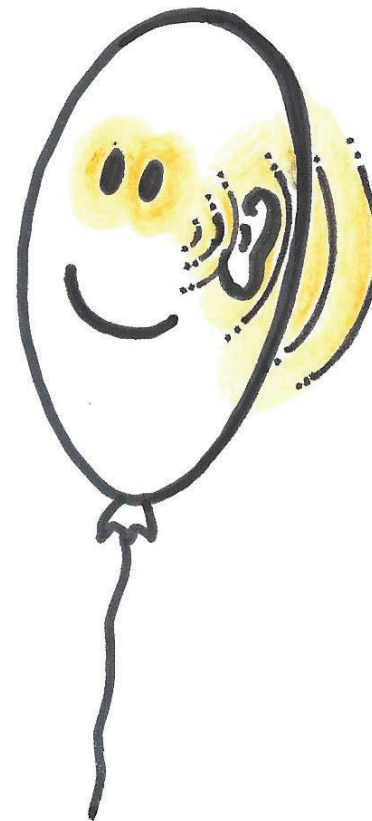
Is there enough light?	<i>In general, people living with dementia need more light to see clearly. Increase light levels and use natural daylight where possible. It will help the person with dementia to see better. You may also consider leaving some lights on at night so the person can find the bathroom/toilet.</i>
Is there enough contrast in colours?	<i>Dementia can make it hard to see contrasts. For example: if there is a white plate on a white table, people with dementia may have difficulty seeing the plate. A coloured plate or tablecloth may help.</i>
Is the person with dementia wearing his/her glasses?	<i>Make sure glasses are clean and in reach. Consider a glasses lanyard.</i>
Are the glasses still okay?	<i>If the person with dementia wears glasses, check whether they are clean and still comfortable to wear. Are the glasses comfortable around the ears and nose? Does the person with dementia lose the glasses often? Perhaps a neck cord would be helpful in that case.</i>
Do you need to consult a doctor?	<i>If the person with dementia does not have glasses, but cannot see well anymore, consult a doctor. If the person with dementia wears glasses, check to see if the prescription is still okay, or consult a doctor.</i>


### 3. To help improve hearing

Remember:

Hearing and seeing is important for communication.

There are different ways to help improve hearing and seeing.



1. Activity 	
To help improve hearing	
Check the following:	
Is there no background noise?	<i>Minimising background noise will help to improve hearing. Perhaps take the person with dementia to a quieter location with fewer distractions. Turn off the TV or radio when trying to communicate with them.</i>
If the person with dementia has a hearing aid, is he/she wearing it?	<i>Is the aid in reach and easily found when needed.</i>
Is the hearing aid still okay?	<i>If the person with dementia is wearing a hearing aid, check they are clean, fit snugly in the ear canal, are still comfortable to wear and the batteries are charged.</i>
Do you need to consult a doctor?	<i>If the person with dementia wears a hearing aid: Is the prescription still OK, or do you need to consult a doctor? If the person with dementia does not have a hearing aid, but cannot hear well anymore, you should also consult a doctor.</i>



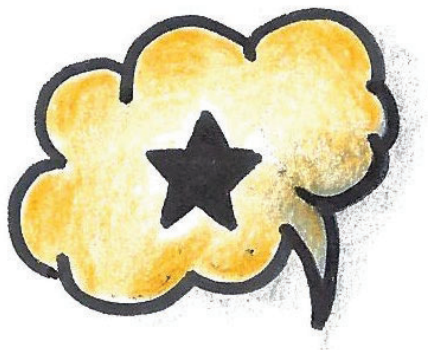
### Many ways to improve communication

There are many ways to improve communication.

A first step is to optimise seeing and hearing.

To improve seeing, make sure that there is enough light and contrast in colours. Check glasses or consult a doctor if you are unsure.

To improve hearing, reduce background noise. Check hearing aids or consult a doctor if you are unsure.



### Get attention in a respectful way

The person living with dementia is still a person with feelings, no matter how serious the disease is or communication problems are. Therefore, an important first step is to make contact with them by catching their attention.

Below are some suggested ways to get the attention of a person with dementia.

Please select which you think will help and drop them into the box:

#### Check your understanding



- ☐ Raise your voice or shout.
- ☐ Speak clearly, slowly, at a volume that is comfortable for the person, face to face and at eye level.
- ☐ Tap a hand, arm or front of the shoulder.
- ☐ Stop and hold the person to make their listen.
- ☐ Approach from the back and touch the person's shoulder.
- ☐ Call the person with dementia by a name that he or she recognises.

## ANSWERS - Improving communication

### Check your understanding



#### *Get attention in a respectful way*

- ✗ **Raise your voice or shout.**  
Raising your voice is not a respectful way to gain attention. It may even make the person with dementia feel scared, sad, frustrated or angry.
- ✓ **Speak clearly, slowly, at a volume that is comfortable for the person, face to face and at eye level.**  
This is an appropriate way to make contact. It shows that you are seeking contact in a respectful manner.
- ✓ **Tap a hand, arm or front of the shoulder.**  
This is a good way to attract attention of a person with dementia.



- ✗ **Stop and hold the person to make their listen.**  
This is not a respectful way to gain attention. It may even make the person with dementia distressed or angry.
- ✗ **Approach from the back and touch the person's shoulder.**  
This may startle someone who is not expecting you or perhaps did not hear you coming.
- ✓ **Call the person with dementia by a name that he or she recognises.**  
This is a good way to attract attention of a person with dementia. It might be the first name but also a nickname that was used in the past.

**Be aware that:**

- Gaining attention is a first important step for good communication.
- There are different ways to gain the attention of a person with dementia in a respectful manner.

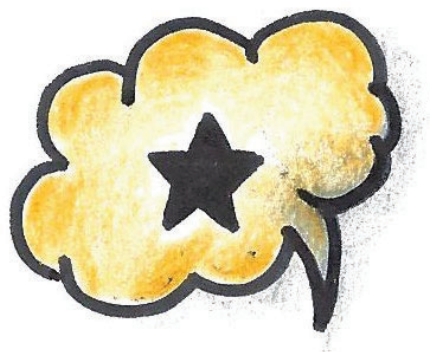


## Keep it simple

Often the language we use to get a message across is too complicated. Keeping it simple will help the person living with dementia understand you better.

Let's look at an example:

Jonathan supports his father who has dementia.  
Jonathan notices that his father does not understand him.



## Can you tell why?

Select the objects in the list below and drop them in the box if you think they could impair communication between Jonathan and his father.

### Check your understanding



- ☐ The radio is on.
- ☐ Jonathan is making a phone call.
- ☐ Jonathan asks multiple questions at the same time.

## ANSWERS - Improving communication

## Check your understanding



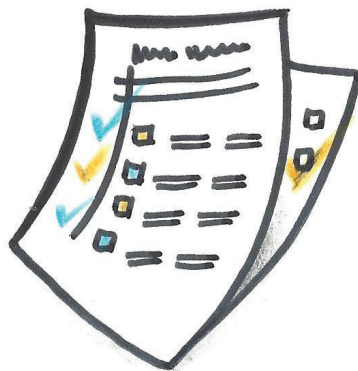
- ✓ **The radio is on.**  
Very good! A radio can be very distracting. It makes it difficult to follow what someone else is saying, especially for people with dementia who can have difficulty concentrating.
- ✓ **Jonathan is making a phone call.**  
Very good! Making a phone call does not show interest and will confuse his father. It's important for people with dementia to try and stay focused on one task. It will be difficult to get back on to the same subject after making a phone call.
- ✓ **Jonathan asks multiple questions at the same time.**  
Well done! Jonathan is trying to ask too many questions at the same time. This makes it difficult for his father to understand.



### Keep in Mind



- Ask or tell the person living with dementia one thing at a time.
- Use simple language and keep sentences short: avoid long and complicated sentences, focus on one subject at a time, and when needed change from open-ended questions to closed-ended questions that can be answered with YES or NO.
- Make sure there are no distracting background noises such as a TV or radio.



### Take the person seriously

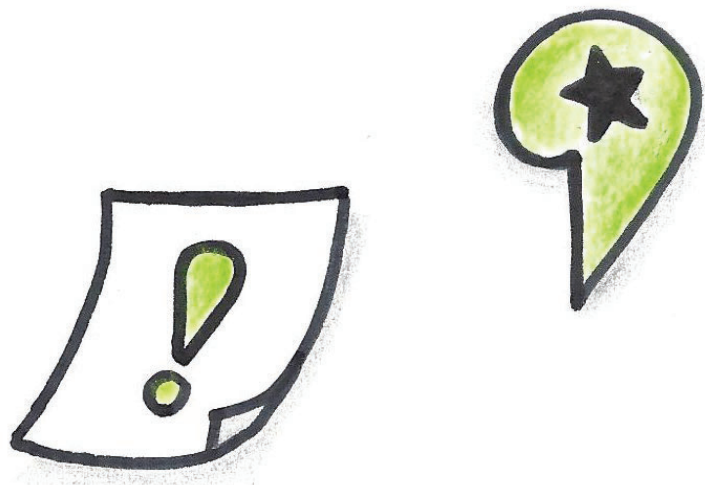
At some point, you may not understand what the person you care for means. The language the person uses may even seem strange or funny.

But be aware: it is important that you take the person seriously. the person you care for is trying to tell you something, however the person communication skills may be impaired due to the dementia.

### Let's have a look at John

John and his wife are visiting John's father who has dementia. His father wants to describe his morning to John, but he cannot find the right words. John says to his wife in front of his father: 'I have no clue what he means!' His wife answers: 'Yes, I don't know either. He is just like a child!'

Which of the following statements do you think is correct?



### Check your understanding



- ☐ John should not talk about his father when his father is in the same room. He could have said: 'It is difficult to understand what you mean.' In addition, he could have asked some questions that his father could have answered with a 'YES' or a 'NO'. For example: 'Have you gone outside this morning?'
- ☐ John and his wife could be more patient.
- ☐ John and his wife could ask John's father if it is okay when they try to guess what he wants to say.
- ☐ It is important that John and his wife talk about the difficulty to understand John's father in front of him.
- ☐ His wife is right: a person with dementia is just like a child.

## ANSWERS - Improving communication

### Check your understanding



✓ **John should not talk about his father when his father is in the same room. He could have said: 'It is difficult to understand what you mean.' In addition, he could have asked some questions that his father could have answered with a 'YES' or a 'NO'. For example: 'Have you gone outside this morning?'**

Correct! John takes his father seriously in trying to understand what he wants to say. Do not talk about the person, while the person is in the same room.

✓ **John and his wife could be more patient.**  
Correct! It takes people with dementia longer to find the right words and they need time and patience to be understood.

✓ **John and his wife could ask John's father if it is okay when they try to guess what he wants to say.**  
Correct! Some people with dementia appreciate help with finding the right words or fill in sentences.

✗ **It is important that John and his wife talk about the difficulty to understand John's father in front of him.**

This is not correct! Although it might be important to talk about ways to improve their understanding of their father, they should not do so in front of him.

✗ **His wife is right: a person with dementia is just like a child.**

This is not correct! It is important to take a person with dementia seriously, and treat them with respect and dignity.

### Keep in Mind



- It is important to take the person seriously.
- It may help to ask closed-ended questions that can be answered with YES or NO to understand what the person living with dementia means.





Pay attention to reactions

You can tell a lot from the way someone speaks and looks. For example, if someone is smiling, you can assume that this person is in a good mood.

Keeping this in mind will help you communicate with the person living with dementia.

Check your understanding



Take a look at the cartoons.

Do you understand this feeling?

Select the right answer below and drop it into the box at the right.

☐  
☐  
☐  
☐

Happy  
Angry  
Sad  
Scared

☐  
☐  
☐  
☐

Happy  
Angry  
Sad  
Scared

☐  
☐  
☐  
☐

Happy  
Angry  
Sad  
Scared

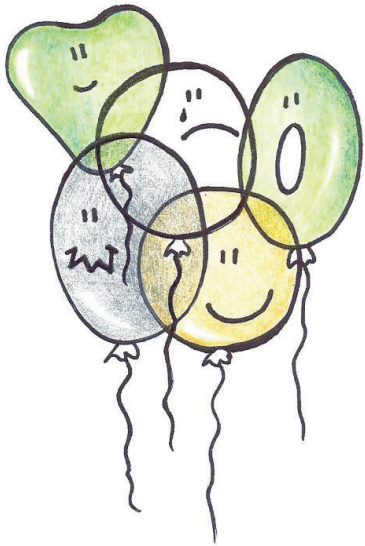
☐  
☐  
☐  
☐

Happy  
Angry  
Sad  
Scared

Keep in Mind



- Facial expressions and body language tell us how a person is feeling. Other examples of body language include fidgeting, having arms crossed or pacing. These can give us messages about how the person may be feeling, such as nervous, upset or anxious.
- Take notice the person's responses and body language.

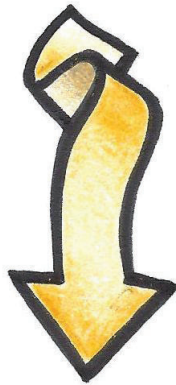


### Give compliments

Complimenting the person is important.  
In general, it is much more effective to say what someone is doing well, than to say what the person is doing wrong.

A compliment can range from commenting that someone has done something well to saying that they look nice.

You can give compliments in different ways and in different situations.



Below there is a list of statements.  
These statements include several compliments. However, there are also some statements that are not compliments at all.  
**Click on the statements that are compliments and drop them in the box.**

#### Check your understanding



- ☐ You look beautiful.
- ☐ You are good at...
- ☐ What are you doing?! Stop it!
- ☐ You are very helpful. Thank you.
- ☐ You are making a mess.
- ☐ You should be ashamed of forgetting everything.
- ☐ I love having you around.
- ☐ You are funny.
- ☐ You are driving me crazy.
- ☐ You have a great smile.

ANSWERS - Improving communication

Check your understanding



- ✓ You look beautiful.
- ✓ You are good at...
- ✗ What are you doing?! Stop it!
- ✓ You are very helpful. Thank you.
- ✗ You are making a mess.
- ✗ You should be ashamed of forgetting everything.
- ✓ I love having you around.
- ✓ You are funny.
- ✗ You are driving me crazy.
- ✓ You have a great smile.

Keep in Mind



- The person will feel good if you say something positive.
- Compliments can be given in many different ways.
- Saying something negative will make a person feel bad.



Think about all the things you like about the person.  
Now try to write down something you would say to the person to  
give the person a compliment.

Activity



Compliments:

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Show compassion

It is important that you show compassion, even if a person with dementia is repeating the same questions over and over again, or when understanding each other becomes increasingly difficult.

You need to remember that dementia is a disease that can make communication difficult. For example, a person with dementia may have forgotten what the person has just said. You need to use extra effort and be patient with the person.

How to show compassion?

Let's look at an example.

Will often visits his sister, who is living with dementia. His sister lives with her brother-in-law. Her husband passed away six months ago. When Will is visiting, his sister often asks where her husband is. Will finds this difficult. He knows she is missing her husband and may have forgotten that he died. Will tries to distract her by asking questions about other things, such as: 'How was your day?' His sister persists in asking where her husband is.

Check your understanding

?

Did Will respond well?

☐

YES

☐

NO

Check your understanding

?

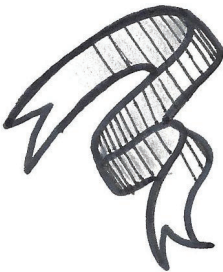
x

YES

✓

NO

That's right! Will wants to distract his sister's attention because he knows she is missing her husband and will be sad to be reminded that he died. Although Will has the best intentions, ignoring her questions is not a right way to respond especially because his sister persists in asking.



Today Will tries a different approach

He says: 'It must be difficult for you that he died.'  
He gives her a hug.  
He shows some pictures of her husband that he brought from home and starts to talk with her about her husband.

Will shows that he understands she is missing her husband and tries to support her.

Check your understanding		?
Did Will respond well?		
<input type="checkbox"/>	YES	
<input type="checkbox"/>	NO	

Check your understanding		?
✓	YES	
✗	NO	

Indeed! It is important to try different responses to identify the one which will cause the less distress. Initially Will tried to distract her with no success. Today by showing her pictures of her husband, they had a good conversation about her husband.

Further information

Talk to me is a help sheet for good communication for talking to people with dementia.  
The document is available via:  
[https://www.dementia.org.au/sites/default/files/TalkToMe\\_Brochure\\_FoldedDL\\_HR.pdf](https://www.dementia.org.au/sites/default/files/TalkToMe_Brochure_FoldedDL_HR.pdf)

Keep in mind that people with dementia also have the right to grieve the loss of a loved one in a safe and supportive setting.

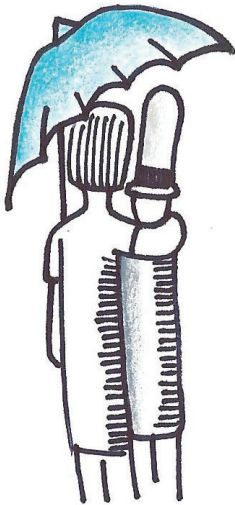
This example of Will and his sister shows:

You can show compassion in different ways.

It is important to take a person with dementia seriously and to pay attention to the questions he or she has.

Showing compassion helps to improve your relationship with the person you care for.

Tip



## Congratulations!

This is your certificate for practising 7 communication skills:

- Check ability to hear and see
- Get attention in a respectful way
- Keep it simple
- Take the person seriously
- Pay attention to reactions
- Give compliments
- Show compassion.

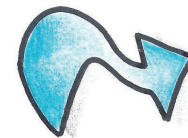


## RELATED LEARNING UNITS

- Module 4 Unit 1 Eating and drinking - More pleasant mealtimes
- Module 2 Unit 3 Supported decision making

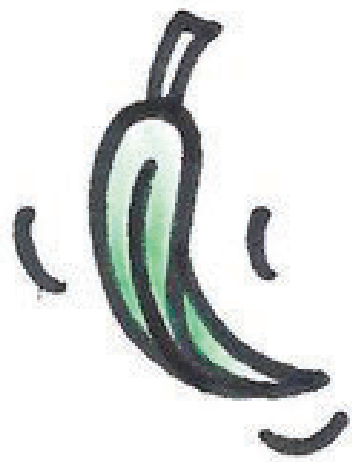
You finished this learning unit, well done!

Would you like to try the following relaxation exercise?



## Neck movements

With this exercise you will feel less tension in your neck. It will also increase the blood flow to your brain.



This is how you do it:

- Make sure to move slowly and with attention.
- Bend your neck forward and backward.
- Inhale while you lift your head up and back. Exhale while you drop your chin to your chest.
- Rotate your chin from side to side.
- Inhale when your chin is in the centre. Exhale when you look to the side.
- Drop your ear towards your shoulder.
- Inhale when you are in the centre. Exhale when you drop your ear to your shoulder.
- Repeat 5 times.



You finished this unit, well done!