# A COMMUNICATIONS MODULE:



**COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR**

**ALZHEIMER’S CLIENTS**



*A Communication Module:*

**COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR ALZHEIMER’S CLIENTS**

We hope you enjoy this inservice, prepared by registered nurses especially

for caregivers like you!

# Instructions for the Learner

**After finishing this inservice, you will be able to:**

*Describe the normal course of events that must take place for communication to be successful.*



*Describe two things that can go wrong, making communication difficult for people with Alzheimer’s.*



*List at least three things you can do to help your client communicate better with you and others.*



*Discuss what you can do to communicate better with your clients.*



*Practice patient and thoughtful communication in your daily work with Alzheimer’s clients.*

***If you are studying the inservice on your own, please do the following:***

### Read through **all** the material. You may find it useful to have a highlighting marker nearby as you read. Highlight any information that is new to you or that you feel is especially important.

* If you have questions about anything you read, please ask your supervisor.
* Take the quiz. Think about each statement and pick the best answer.
* Check with your supervisor for the right answers. You need **8 correct** to pass!
* Print your name, write in the date, and then sign your name.
* Email In the Know at [feedback@knowingmore.com](mailto:feedback@knowingmore.com) with your comments and/or suggestions for improving this inservice.

**THANK YOU!**

*A Communication Module:*

**Communicating with Your Alzheimer’s Client**

**The Words and Memories Dance and Hide**

**Inside This Inservice:**

*How Communication Happens*

*The Slow Decline*

*Helping Clients Communicate with You*

*How You Can Communicate Better with Clients*

*Handling Anger*

*Handling Tough Questions*

*Alternative Therapies*

*Final Tips*

2

3

4

5

6

7

8-9

10

**© 2020 In the Know** [**www.knowingmore.com**](http://www.knowingmore.com/) **Expires 12/31/2022 IMPORTANT:**

*This topic may be copied for use within each physical location that purchases this inservice from In the Know. All other copying or distribution is strictly prohibited, including sharing between multiple locations and/or uploading the file or any portion thereof to the internet or to an LMS (unless a license to do so is obtained from In the Know).*

***In accordance with industry standards, this inservice material expires on December 31, 2022.*** *After that date, you may purchase a current copy of the materials by calling 877-809-5515.*

If you care for clients who suffer from Alzheimer’s disease, chances are good that you’ve had your fair share of communication problems and frustrations.

As the disease progresses, those who suffer from it lose more and more of their ability to communicate.

* + At first, the words and memories just ***dance away*** for a minute or two and then come back.
  + Later, the words and memories seem to ***play hide-and-seek***, but they can usually be found with a little help.
  + Eventually, the words and the memories just ***pack up and move out*** of the person altogether.

As you care for client’s with Alzheimer’s disease, one of the most important things you can do for them is to remember that they once had a life. They had experiences and adventures. They had jobs and families.

They contributed to the world in their own special way.

That means that the lost words and memories are far more sad and frustrating to them than they are to you. In fact, the lost words and memories are often the reason behind the angry and sometimes violent behaviors you may see in your clients.

***And while you may not have any control over your client’s abilities or behaviors, your words, the tone of your voice and your calm demeanor can make everything easier for everyone! Keep reading to find out all about how you can communicate effectively with your clients and how you can help them to communicate with you!***

## HOW COMMUNICATION HAPPENS

##### Five critical factors must all work together for communication to be successful. There must be a:

* **SENDER:** The sender is the person who *starts* the communication.
* **MESSAGE:** The message is formed by the sender.
* **MEDIUM:** The sender chooses *how* she will communicate. It may be through speaking, writing, typing or even by using sign language.
* **RECEIVER:** Someone must hear, read or see the message and *understand*

its meaning.

* **FEEDBACK:** The receiver must provide feedback that shows the message was understood.

**2 WAYS THINGS CAN GO WRONG WITH ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE**

**RECEPTIVE COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS:**

* Receptive communication refers to the way a listener *receives* and *understands* a message. A person with Alzheimer's disease may have damage in the

temporal lobe of the brain. Damage in this area can make it difficult to understand spoken words.

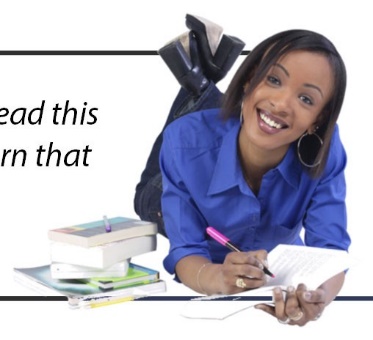
#### EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS:

* Expressive communication refers to *how a person gives a message*. This can be done by gesturing, speaking or writing and can be enhanced by

using body language or emotional expressions. A person with Alzheimer’s may have trouble remembering certain words. And he or she

may have trouble showing the correct emotion. For instance, the person may cry or look sad when they are actually happy.

##### In a Nutshell: Alzheimer’s disease impairs a person’s ability to communicate effectively. It reduces the ability to understand information (receptive language) and the ability to express information (expressive language).



*Grab your favorite highlighter! As you read this inservice,* ***highlight five things*** *you learn that you didn’t know before. Share this new information with your co-workers!*



* + Losing the ability to communicate is often reported as being the **most frustrating and difficult problem** for people with Alzheimer’s disease (as well as for their family members and their caregivers).
  + ***While each person with Alzheimer’s disease is unique, there are a few common communication problems you may notice, such as:***
    - Difficulty in finding the right word.
    - Ability to speak fluently, but using made up words and speaking sentences that don’t make much sense.
    - Inability to understand what you are saying or only being able to grasp part of it.
    - Loss of reading and writing skills.
    - Difficulty expressing emotions appropriately.

## COMMUNICATION SLOWLY DECLINES



Alzheimer’s disease is a progressive illness. That means the symptoms get worse over time. This holds true for the person’s ability to communicate. It gets worse over time—as the disease progresses.

#### THE “EARLY STAGE” OF AD

The symptoms of the early-stage of Alzheimer’s disease come on slowly. A person with early-stage Alzheimer’s disease may look well and may be able to “cover up” the signs of the disease. Communication problems may start as the person begins to have:

**STILL ALICE**

In her book/movie titled, Still Alice, author Lisa Genova provides a stunningly accurate portrayal of one woman’s gradual slide into Alzheimer’s.

Alice, (played by Julianne Moore) is a mother, wife and doctor who learns she has early onset Alzheimer’s disease. As she struggles with what lies ahead, she argues:

*“And I have no control over which yesterdays I keep and which ones get deleted. This disease will not be bargained with. I can't offer it the names of the US presidents in exchange for the names of my children. I can't give it the names of state capitals and keep the memories of my husband.”*

**Read the book or watch the movie for deeper insight into living with Alzheimer’s disease.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |
|  |  |

* + - * **Poor concentration and a short attention span.** It may become difficult to focus attention on someone who is speaking—which makes it hard to get the whole meaning of the message.
      * **Forgetfulness**, such as forgetting names, dates and how things work.

#### THE “MIDDLE STAGE” OF AD

The middle-stage of Alzheimer’s disease is also known as the Progressive Period. It may last up to 12 years. The symptoms of the middle-stage of Alzheimer’s disease include all the signs of the early

stage, but now they get ***much worse.*** There are also new symptoms , such as:

* + - * + Not being able to remember words.

Difficulty being part of a conversation.

Talking “in circles.”

* Asking repetitive questions.
  + - * + Problems with following directions.

#### SYMPTOMS OF THE “LATE STAGE” OF ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE

The late-stage of Alzheimer’s disease can last for three years or more. It is also known as the Terminal Period. People with late-stage Alzheimer’s disease are often bedridden. Communication problems include:

* + - * Loss of short and long-term memory.
      * Loss of speech, although Alzheimer’s patients may groan or scream.
      * Failure to recognize others or even themselves.

## HELPING YOUR CLIENT COMMUNICATE WITH YOU (AND OTHERS)

##### Depending on the stage and the severity of the disease, your client with Alzheimer’s may have difficulty expressing his thoughts and feelings.

***Here are some ways your can help your client communicate with you and others:***

***Think about a time when you struggled to understand what your client was trying to say.***

What was your client saying or doing?

What did he or she really mean?

How did you support your client through the difficulty?

What could you have done differently to help?

***What advice would you give to a new caregiver who is struggling to communicate with someone who has Alzheimer’s?***

* **Allow more time.** It may take a little longer for your client to find the right words and to get them out. It’s important to be patient and show your support through the process. Let your client know you're listening and trying to understand by making eye contact and nodding.
* **Stay present in the conversation.** Listen closely and be careful not to interrupt.
* **Clarify your understanding by repeating back what you heard.**
* **Acknowledge frustrations.** Being unable to communicate can be frustrating and isolating. Try saying, *“I know you want to tell me something important. I’m trying to understand.”*
* **Give permission to take a break.** If your client is having trouble communicating, let her know that it's okay. Encourage her to relax and to continue when she’s ready.
* **Take a guess.** If the person cannot find a word, try guessing what she is trying to say or ask the person to point or gesture.

#### Manage environmental

**noise.** Keep distractions such as television and radio at a minimum when talking to your client. This will keep the client focused, and enhance your ability to listen.

* **Never criticizing or correct.** It’s not helpful to tell the person he is wrong. Instead, listen and try to find the meaning in what is being said. Repeat what was said if it helps to clarify the thought.
* **Avoid arguing and/or defending yourself.** If your client says something you don't agree with or accuses you of doing something wrong, just let it go! Standing your ground in this situation only makes things worse — and can even increase your client’s agitation and make communication more difficult.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO TO COMMUNICATE BETTER WITH YOUR CLIENTS?

* + **Approach Alzheimer’s clients from the front.** Don’t speak to them suddenly from behind or you might startle them.
  + **Keep your voice low and unhurried.** Use simple, everyday words, but don’t use “baby talk.”

**HONORING PERSONAL PREFERENCES**

It’s important to always try to honor your client’s personal preferences. But how do that if he or she can’t tell you?

You can ask family members about your client’s likes and dislikes, and you can observe your client during routine activities.

If your client appears happy or content (is involved, pays attention, smiles) during an activity, then you can assume your client enjoys it!

**Notice how your client seems to feel during:**

* Tub baths, showers, or bed baths.
* Watching certain programs (news, cartoons, dramas, comedies).
* Visits from certain family members or friends.
* Listening to music.
* Spending time outdoors.
  + **Identify yourself.** Don’t be offended if your client doesn’t remember you from day to day.
  + **Try to stay calm and positive.** If you are feeling stressed or irritable, your mood can easily rub off on someone with Alzheimer’s disease. If you stay calm and positive, your client will probably “mirror” your good mood.
  + **Keep it simple.** Ask one “yes” or “no” question at a time. If the client doesn’t answer you, repeat the question using the same words.
  + **Give plenty of time to respond.** It can take up to one minute for your AD client’s brain to process each sentence you speak.
  + **Alzheimer’s clients will often copy your actions.** If you smile, they will smile. If you frown or get angry, so will they!
  + **Describe everything.** Be sure to let Alzheimer’s clients know what you are doing—one step at a time.
  + **Don’t talk in terms of time.** For example, say *“We’ll take a walk after lunch.”* not *“We’ll take a walk in one hour.”* People with Alzheimer’s disease lose their sense of time.
  + **Use nonverbal communication.** Try using nonverbal cues such as touching or pointing to help your clients understand what you are saying.
  + **Remain respectful.** Be sure to call your clients by name and be respectful, saying things like “thank you,” “please,” “yes, ma’am” or “no, sir.” This helps them feel like the healthy adults they

once were.

* + **Praise your Alzheimer’s clients.** They need to hear positive feedback like *“Good job!”* or

*“You’re doing great.”* or *“You look beautiful today.”*

* + **Limit choices.** Alzheimer’s clients become frustrated very easily. Don’t give them a choice if there isn’t one. For example, don’t say *“Do you want to take a bath now?”* Instead say *“It’s time for your bath now.”*

## WHEN COMMUNICATION TURNS ANGRY

***Anger is a common emotion for people with Alzheimer’s disease, particularly in the later stages.*** *No one knows for sure why Alzheimer’s patients become angry—and sometimes even aggressive—but it may be a symptom of frustration or a reaction to other people or the environment.*

***While you may not have any control over your client’s anger, you do have control of your own behaviors and how you react to it.*** *Your behaviors and responses have the potential to turn the anger around!* **Here are some things you can do if your Alzheimer’s client becomes angry:**



**PREVENT ANGRY OUTBURSTS**

You may not be able to prevent all angry outbursts, but there are a few things you can try, such as:

**Simplify everyday activities.** For example, instead of just saying, *“Put on your shirt,”* start with, *“Your shirt is on the bed.”* When your client sees the shirt, say, *“Pick up the shirt.”* Then, *“Put your arm in the sleeve,”* and so on.

**Keep ‘em full and rested!** Feeling hungry and/or tired can be confusing sensations to someone who doesn’t understand what the feelings mean.

**Cut back on television viewing.** The fast-paced visual images and loud sounds can overstimulate your client. Some may not be able to tell the difference between fact and fiction.

***Talk about it with your supervisor and co-workers.***

***Find out what they do!***

* **You don’t have to be right this time!** Never argue or try to reason with an angry client. This will make the situation worse.
* **Remain calm and comforting.** You are the role model for calm and rational behavior.
* **Help untangle confusing emotions.** Observe body language and help your clients identify their emotions. For example, you might say *“You seem angry, can I help?”*
* **Provide frequent reassurance.** You can say *“I’m here to help,”* and

*“Everything is going to be OK.”*

* **Remove distractions.** Turn off televisions and radios. Close windows and doors. Dim the lights. Ask visitors to step out for a moment if their presence seems distressing to your clients.
* **Provide time and space.** If your client does not present a danger to himself or to others, watch from a safe distance and

allow him to settle on his own.

* **You’re not the boss or jailor!** Never scold, punish or make the person feel bad for feeling or expressing anger.
* **NEVER APPLY RESTRAINTS** unless ordered to do so by a doctor.
* **Distract or redirect.** Offer an alternate activity that your client enjoys (such as taking a walk).
* **Get help if you need it.** If your client seems like he may become violent, call for help right away. Get to a safe place if you can. Keep your

client as safe as possible and wait for help to arrive.

* **Make mental notes.** Pay attention to the time, what’s happening and what may have triggered your client’s anger. That way you can avoid similar situations in the future.

# HANDLING TOUGH QUESTIONS

As your client’s disease advances, there may be times when their memories become tangled up in a different time and place. How you respond to these situations can mean the difference between a calm transition and a meltdown.

#### Here are some examples of tough, uncomfortable, and sometimes heartbreaking questions you may get from your Alzheimer’s clients:



**COULD YOUR CLIENT BE DEPRESSED?**

Depression is very common among people with Alzheimer's, especially in the early and middle stages.

**Some symptoms of depression include:**

* Feeling sad or tearful.
* No interest in doing anything.
* Having feelings of worthlessness.
* Being agitated easily.

**BUT . . .**

Depression in Alzheimer's doesn't always look like depression in other people.

***It may be less severe, and it may come and go.***

If you see signs of depression, it’s important to report it right away, even if it seems mild.

Treatment is available and can make a significant difference in quality of life.

 **"Can you take me to my parents (or spouse)?"**

How do you respond to this request if your client no longer has living parents (or a spouse)? First, try to remember that it will do no good to tell her that her parents (or spouse) have died. In fact, this will only cause her to suffer the grief and loss all over again.

Instead, you might put off the request until the memory passes by saying, *“It’s not a good time to travel,”* or *“Let’s make a plan to visit next week.”*

Another option is to indulge the memory and ask your client to tell you about the person she wants to visit. Allowing her time to reminisce may alleviate the feeling she has of needing to visit them.

####  "Who are you?" or "Do I know you?"

If the person says this to you, just give your name and ask if it’s a good time for you do whatever it was you were there to do (feed, bathe, etc.).

Don’t make a big deal about it or dwell on the fact that they don’t recognize you. Forgetting people is painful and embarrassing enough for your client.

It’s also important to help family members deal with the uncomfortable feelings that come up when their loved one says these words to them. ***Reassure them that the lost memory is a normal part of the disease and has nothing to do with them being unimportant or unmemorable.***

**ALTERNATIVES: PETS & COMMUNICATION**

Pet therapy can help clients with Alzheimer’s disease recover some essential life skills by:

* **Improving short term memory.** Calling the pet by name or asking for a behavior such as “sit” and then rewarding compliance can improve short-term memory.



**BABY DOLL THERAPY**

Want to communicate better with clients suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's? Why not try "Baby Doll Therapy"?

Research shows that clients with dementia or Alzheimer’s communicate better when holding baby dolls!

Having a “baby” to care for also enhances cooperation and can reduce agitation.

* ***Does your workplace use “Baby Doll Therapy” or something similar? If so, is it working?***
* ***Why do you think this type of therapy works so well?***
* ***Some opponents argue that this type of therapy may be upsetting to family members. What are your thoughts?***
* **Improving long term memory.** Seeing a pet may trigger the person to remember one of their favorite pets or to reminisce about its favorite toy or trick.
* **Improving communication.** Talking about the pet or to the pet can improve communication skills since pets do not care if the person's speech is clear or their thoughts make sense.
* **Improving the senses.** The sense of smell (puppy breath), touch (the silkiness of a cat’s coat), and temperature (the warmth of the animal’s head on a lap) can improve environmental awareness and decrease withdrawal. Sight is stimulated when the individual watches the animal move around the room. Listening skills are sharpened when the person tunes in to hear purring or panting. ***Heightened senses improve the ability to communicate!***

##### You play an important role in assessing the need for a pet in your client’s life. A client may benefit from pet therapy if he or she:

* Has few or no outside visitors.
* Seems lonely, depressed or anxious.
* Reminisces frequently about past pets in his or her life.
* Has the physical and mental capacity to pet, stroke, hug, or just sit with an animal without accidentally harming it.

##### If you notice one or more of these signs in your clients, you can:

* **In facilities**—advocate for pet visitation or animal-assisted therapy

programs.

* **In home health**—open the discussion to the possibility of a companion pet, if you think the client is able to handle the responsibility. If pet ownership is not a possibility, look for

local groups that provide pet visitation services.

## ALTERNATIVES: LISTENING TO MUSIC CAN IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

**Can a person who has completely stopped communicating in the late stages of Alzheimer’s regain the ability to talk and have meaningful conversations?** You bet! And music is the key to unlocking the silence.

Plenty of research is going on right now to measure the benefits of using iPods (or other mp3 playing devices) with personalized playlists for people suffering from dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.



1. Communicating with client’s who have Alzheimer’s disease may be one of the most difficult and frustrating parts of your job.
2. While you may not have any control over your client’s abilities or behaviors, your words, the tone of voice and your calm demeanor can make all the difference!
3. Alzheimer’s disease reduces the ability to understand information (receptive language) and the ability to express information (expressive language).
4. Anger is a common emotion for people with Alzheimer’s disease, particularly in the later stages. It’s usually a sign of frustration.
5. Alternative therapies like music, pets and baby dolls are inexpensive and safe options you can try without a doctor’s order.
   * **Listening to preferred music though personal headphones has had a major, positive impact on everyone who uses them.** Many participants in the studies have become happier and more social. And the relationships among staff, residents and family have deepened.

**Not convinced?** Go to musicandmemory.org and look around. You’ll find research on the connection between music and the brain. Or watch the documentary called **Alive Inside** on Netflix.

#### Here’s how you can bring music into your client’s world:

* + An iPod Shuffle (or similar device) is a good choice since it has very few buttons, no display screen and is easy to learn how to operate.
  + Don’t have access to an iPod? Ask family members to give their loved ones an iPod (or other mp3 player) as a gift or to donate an older model that is no longer being used.
  + Here’s another solution. Most smart phones can store and play music through headphones too. Or, you can download free apps like Pandora or Spotify and stream free music through the phone.
  + Be sure to include the client

and/or the family members in building the playlist. The wrong choice of music can make the whole technique backfire.

* + Larger, padded headphones that rest on the sides of the head and ears will be more comfortable than small ear buds that go inside the ears.

*Images from Alive Inside documentary.*



## FINAL TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH CLIENTS WITH ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE

Communicating with client’s who have Alzheimer’s disease may be one of the most difficult and frustrating parts of your job. **Here are a few final tips:**

* **Think about every word you speak.** Use short sentences and ask only one question at a time. This keeps the client focused on one thought at a time.

*Now that you‘ve read this inservice on communicating with Alzheimer’s clients, jot down a couple of things*

*you learned that you didn’t know before.*

* **Speak slowly and distinctly.** Repeat key words to prevent confusion.
* **Say it with gestures.** Enhance verbal communication with meaningful gestures to give your client more options to receive information.
* **Give simple but exact instructions.** If your client is capable of participating in his or her own care, you might say, *"point to where it hurts," "open your mouth,"* or *"lift your arm."*
* **Avoid finishing your client's sentences.** Allow your client to complete his own sentences or thoughts. If he gets stuck, ask for permission to help. Say the word or phrase slowly and distinctly if help is requested.
* **Be honest.** Never say you understand if you do not. This may increase frustration and decrease the client’s trust in you.
* **Acknowledge frustrations.** Being unable to communicate can be frustrating and isolating. Watch for signs of depression or helplessness.
* **Stand close by.** Position yourself within the client’s line of vision. Your client may need to see your face or lips to understand

what you are saying.

* **Assume your client understands you.** Avoid speaking to others in the presence of your client as though he or she understands nothing. It's likely that he does understand, but just can't

express that understanding to you.

* **Encourage socializing.** Ask family members to talk to the client even though he may not respond. This decreases the person’s sense of isolation and maintains self-esteem.

**The Bottom Line:** It’s important to be patient and remain respectful at all times. You may not have any control over your client’s abilities or behaviors, but ***your actions, tone of voice and calm demeanor can make everything easier for everyone!***

