

# communication

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**Tips for successful communication  
at all stages of the disease**



## Communication and dementia

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As the disease progresses, the communication skills of a person with dementia will gradually decline. Eventually, he or she will have more difficulty expressing thoughts and emotions. Ultimately, the person will be unable to understand what is being communicated and lose the ability for verbal expression.

The challenges associated with communication can lead to frustration. It can be helpful for you to understand what changes may occur over time so you can prepare and make adjustments. Anticipating these changes and knowing how to respond can help everyone communicate more effectively.



## Changes in communication

Changes in the ability to communicate can vary and are based on the person and where he or she is in the disease process. Problems you can expect to see at various stages of the disease include:

- › Difficulty finding the right words.
- › Using familiar words repeatedly.
- › Describing familiar objects rather than calling them by name.
- › Easily losing train of thought.
- › Difficulty organizing words logically.
- › Reverting to speaking a native language.
- › Speaking less often.
- › Relying on gestures more than speaking.

### **The Alzheimer's Association recommends ways to communicate during all stages of the disease.**

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## Communication is

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- › How we relate to one another.
- › An important part of our relationships.
- › How we express our needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge and feelings.
- › The exchange of thoughts, messages and information.
- › More about listening than talking.
- › About attitude, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language.

## 1. communication in the early stage

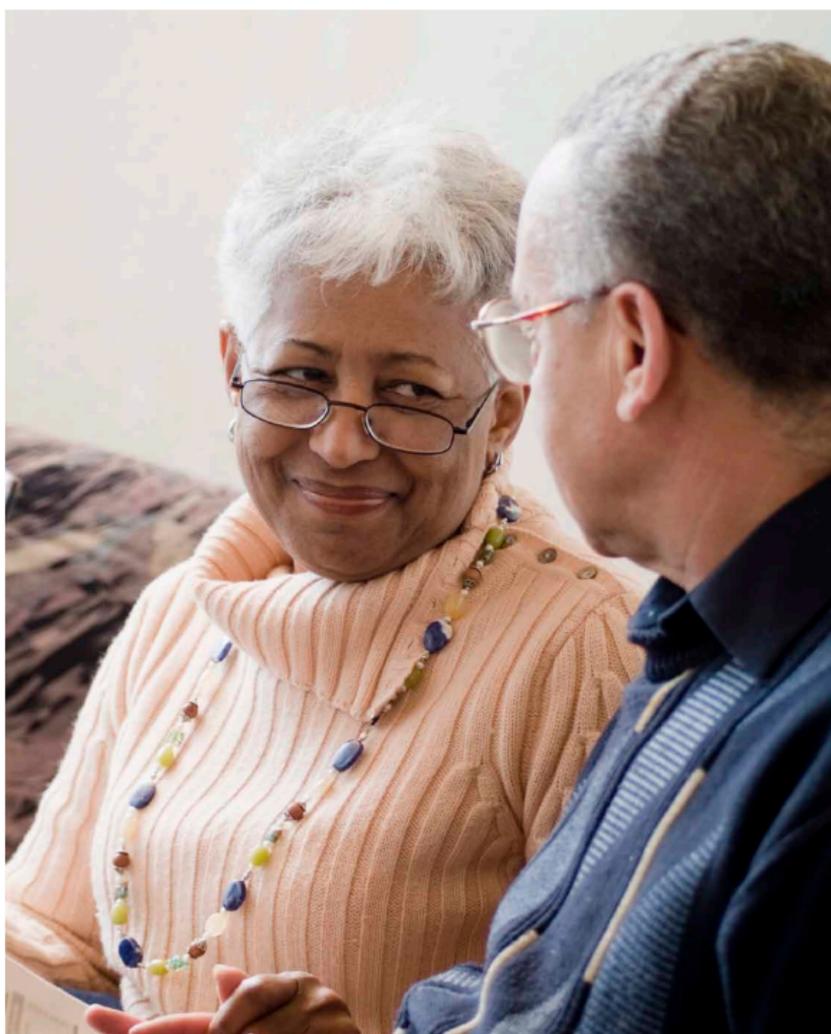
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In the early stage of Alzheimer's, an individual is still able to participate in give-and-take dialogue, have meaningful conversations and engage in social activities. However, he or she may repeat stories, have difficulty finding the right word or feel overwhelmed by excessive stimulation.

### **Tips for successful communication:**

- › Don't make assumptions about a person's ability to communicate because of an Alzheimer's diagnosis. The disease affects each person differently.
- › Don't exclude the person from conversations with family and friends.
- › Speak directly to the person if you want to know how he or she is doing.
- › Take time to listen to how the person is feeling, what he or she is thinking and what his or her needs are.
- › Give the person time to respond. Don't interrupt or finish sentences.

- › Talk with the person about what he or she is still comfortable doing and what they may need help with.
- › Explore which method of communication is most comfortable for the person. This could include email, phone calls or in-person conversations.
- › It's OK to laugh. Sometimes humor lightens the mood and makes communication easier.
- › Be honest and frank about your feelings. Don't pull away; your friendship and support are important to the person with dementia.



## Learn more.

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Visit the Alzheimer's and Dementia Caregiver Center at [alz.org/commtips](https://alz.org/commtips).

## 2. communication in the middle stage

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The middle stage of Alzheimer's is typically the longest and can last for many years. As the disease progresses, the person with Alzheimer's will have greater difficulty communicating and will require more direct care.

### Tips for successful communication:

- ▶ Allow time for response so the person can think about what he or she wants to say.
- ▶ Engage the person in one-on-one conversation in a quiet space with minimal distractions.
- ▶ Be patient and supportive. Offering comfort and reassurance can encourage the person to explain his or her thoughts.
- ▶ Maintain good eye contact. It shows you care about what he or she is saying.
- ▶ Avoid criticizing or correcting. Instead, listen and try to find the meaning in what is being said. Repeat what was said to clarify the thought.
- ▶ Avoid arguing. If the person says something you don't agree with, let it be.
- ▶ Don't overwhelm the person with lengthy requests that require complex thinking. Instead break down tasks with clear, step-by-step instructions.
- ▶ Speak slowly and clearly.
- ▶ Ask one question at a time. Multiple questions at one time can be overwhelming.
- ▶ Ask questions that require a yes or no answer. For example "Would you like some coffee?" rather than "What would you like to drink?"
- ▶ Give visual cues. To help demonstrate the task, point or touch the item you want the individual to use. Or, begin the task for the person.
- ▶ Written notes can be helpful and may also help when a spoken word seems too confusing.

## 3. communication in the late stage

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The late stage of Alzheimer's disease may last from several weeks to several years. As the disease advances, the person with Alzheimer's may rely on nonverbal communication such as facial expressions or vocal sounds. Around-the-clock care is usually required in this stage.

### **Tips for successful communication:**

- › Treat the person with dignity and respect. Avoid talking down to the person or talking as if he or she isn't there.
- › Approach the person from the front and identify yourself.
- › Encourage nonverbal communication. If you don't understand what is being said, ask the person to point or gesture.
- › Sometimes the emotions being expressed are more important than what is being said. Look for feelings behind the words or sounds.
- › Use touch, sights, sounds, smells and tastes as a form of communication with the person.
- › It's OK if you don't know what to do or say; your presence and friendship are most important.





## [alz.org/care](http://alz.org/care)

The Alzheimer's and Dementia Caregiver Center provides information and easy access to resources, such as:

- › Alzheimer's Navigator® — Assess your needs and create customized action plans.
- › Community Resource Finder — Find local resources.
- › ALZConnected® — Connect with others facing Alzheimer's disease.
- › Care Team Calendar — Coordinate caregiving responsibilities among family and friends.
- › Safety Center — Access information and tools.



## [alz.org/findus](http://alz.org/findus)

Chapters in communities nationwide provide support groups, education programs and more.



## **800.272.3900**

24/7 Helpline — Available all day, every day.

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The Alzheimer's Association is the world's leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer's care, support and research. Our mission is to eliminate Alzheimer's disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health.

**Our vision is a world without Alzheimer's®.**

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