Strategies to Optimize Communication with People with Dementia

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Why We Communicate

• Ask Questions
• Share Ideas and Feelings
• Give Information
• Teach
• Learn
• Persuade
• Share needs
• Entertain
• Connect
Communication and AD

• In mild stages of AD
  – many aspects of communication are preserved
  – changes in language

• Early “Cognitive-Communication” Problems

• Later problems with language comprehension and production
Retrospective studies show subtle language changes before AD diagnosis
## Language characteristics/changes according to stages of AD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Characteristics and Changes</th>
<th>Pre-MCI</th>
<th>MCI</th>
<th>Mild AD</th>
<th>Moderate AD</th>
<th>Severe AD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lexical – Semantics</strong>&lt;br&gt;(word retrieval, verbal fluency)</td>
<td>?/+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Syntax</strong>&lt;br&gt;(syntactic complexity, agrammatisms)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phonetics-Phonology</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pragmatics in Discourse</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Henry et al. (2004)  
Amieva et al. (2005)  
Auriacombe et al. (2006)  
Ahmed et al. (2013)
Communication and Mild AD

**Form**
- Grammar and sentence structure preserved.

**Content**
- Word finding problems, verbal fluency.

**Use**
- Difficulty giving directions, telling stories.
- Pronoun use and other non-specific language (“that thing”).
- Frequent requests for clarification and confirmation
- Difficulty comprehending abstract or complex concepts
Communication and Moderate AD

Form
- Difficulty comprehending complex grammar

Content
- Word finding, Naming
- Pronoun Use (comprehension and production)

Use
- Poor topic maintenance
- Reduced cohesion
Communication and Severe AD

Form
- Intact but simplified grammar in language production.
- Reduced comprehension of complex grammar.

Content
- Reduced comprehension of meaning.
- Word, sound substitutions and repetitions

Use
- Poor coherence
- Reduced or limited spoken communication
- Intact prosody
- Poor comprehension
Investigating the Effects of Communication Problems on Caregiver Burden


The Gerontological Society of America
Caregivers and Communication

- Caregivers of individuals with AD report communication problems contribute to their stress (Rabins, 1992).

- Caregiver education about the communication effects of AD may improve coping and communication satisfaction (Ripich, 1994; Ripich, Wykle, & Niles, 1995).

- Use of communication strategies may improve function of individuals with AD (Wilson, R., Rochon, E., Mihailidis, A., & Leonard, C. (2013)).
Quantitative analysis of formal caregivers’ use of communication strategies while assisting individuals with moderate and severe Alzheimer’s disease during oral care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Strategies</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One Proposition</td>
<td>Single direction, request, or instruction</td>
<td>“Please turn on the water.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Propositions</td>
<td>Two directions, requests or instructions</td>
<td>“Please get the towel and dry your hands.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed-ended question</td>
<td>Caregiver’s question can be answered with yes/no</td>
<td>“Can you turn the water on?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended question</td>
<td>Caregiver’s question allows for a more elaborate response</td>
<td>“How do you brush your teeth?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrased repetition</td>
<td>Caregiver restates previous message for clarification.</td>
<td>“Turn the taps on. Turn the taps to get some water.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verification question</td>
<td>Caregiver clarifies, verifies, or interprets resident’s request or response</td>
<td>“Are you telling me you’re done?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Caregiver training can make communication more effective and improve communication satisfaction

- Caregivers use communication strategies effectively in daily interactions with adults with AD (Small, Gutman, Makela, & Hillhouse, 2003).

- Using communication strategies is associated with less frequent communication breakdowns (Small, Gutman, Makela, & Hillhouse, 2003).

- Communication strategy training (1) increases knowledge about communication and AD; (2) can result in more positive attitudes about adults with AD; and (3) can increase satisfaction of communication with adults with AD (Ripich, 1994; 1995).

### Table 3. Proportion of communication strategies used in successful resolutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Early AD</th>
<th>Middle AD</th>
<th>Late AD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give more information</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplify</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rephrase</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask to repeat</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to figure out meaning</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fill in missing information</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show what you mean</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louder</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choices</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesture</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask questions</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask for clarification</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue talking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Savundranayagam & Orange, 2014
Communication Strategy Training

“FOCUSED” Caregiver Training Program
(Ripich, D., 1994, 1995)
Face-to-Face

Make communication easier by reducing distractions.

• One-on-one conversations
• Speak face-to-face
• Maintain eye contact
• Turn down the tv, radio, tablets, phones
• Use hearing aids if applicable
Orientation

Help orient your partner to the conversation by:

- Introduce yourself
- Introducing the topic
- Repeating key words
- Giving time to respond
- Use a calendars and lists
Continuity

Help maintain communication and connections by:

• Continuing the same topic for as long as possible.
• Discussing concrete topics.
• Introducing new topics
Unsticking

When your partner is stuck trying to find a word:

• Ask you partner if he/she wants help unsticking.
• Suggest possible words.
• Ask, “Did you mean…”
• Repeat the sentence with the target word.
Structure

Structure questions to make meaningful response easier.

• Use short, direct questions and statements.
• Give simple response options (e.g., yes/no).
• Prove two options (e.g., “What would you like to watch? Baseball or the news?”)
Exchange

Help maintain the personal connection of communication.

• Begin with common, familiar topics.
• Maintain turn taking.
• Comment and ask questions to encourage communication (not to quiz).
Direct

Make conversation easier to understand by:

• Keeping sentences short, simple, and direct.
• Using keywords (names, places, events) rather than pronouns.
• Using gestures, facial expressions, and pictures.
Communication and AD

• While all aspects of language and communication can be affected by AD, many communication abilities are preserved in the mild-moderate stages of the disease.

• Communication is a collaborative activity and training caregivers can improve communication.
References


Resources

- [https://www.alz.org/national/documents/brochure_communication.pdf](https://www.alz.org/national/documents/brochure_communication.pdf)
- [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)