

# Understanding Communication

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BRITISH COLUMBIA



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## Understanding Communication

- To understand how communication is affected by dementia
- To learn strategies to compensate for declining communication skills

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## June

June and her husband, Norm, were married 51 years and raised 3 children. Five years ago, when June was 76, Norm died. At the funeral her daughter, Andrea, and 2 sons noticed that June seemed very distracted, but they attributed this to her grief.



However, it wasn't improving, and her daughter finally convinced her to see her doctor. Many months and a couple of specialists later, June was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

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## June at the Early Stage

At first June was fine on her own, although Andrea was losing patience with her mother's frequent phone calls asking the same thing. She tried telling her mother that she had already asked the particular question, but she came to realize that it made more sense just to approach each question as if it was the first time her mother had asked it. This made her mother less anxious.

Occasionally June mixed up words or lost her train of thought, but usually Andrea could figure out what she meant.

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## Communication at the Early Stage

<b>Comprehension</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increased difficulty with abstract concepts</li> <li>▪ Difficulty following complex conversations</li> </ul>
<b>Ways of Communicating</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Grammar is more basic</li> <li>▪ Need for confirmation /clarification</li> <li>▪ Some difficulty staying on topic</li> <li>▪ Conversational partner needs to be more directive</li> </ul>
<b>Recalling &amp; Using Words</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increased difficulty finding words</li> </ul>

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## June at the Middle Stage

As time went on June had an increasingly difficult time looking after the details of her daily life.

Andrea arranged home care to help her mother dress, bathe, and get her meals and medication.

Andrea felt that her mother was slipping away, since the close relationship they had always enjoyed was no longer possible.

Conversations were limited and short, and Andrea had to remember to say one idea at a time, in simple phrases and without the quirky jokes that they had once enjoyed so much.



## Communication at the Middle Stage

<b>Comprehension</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Difficulty recognizing objects</li> <li>▪ Difficulty remembering purpose of objects</li> <li>▪ Thinking is more concrete</li> <li>▪ Difficulty concentrating</li> <li>▪ Increased reliance on body language and tone of voice</li> </ul>
<b>Ways of Communicating</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Difficulty organizing information and thoughts</li> <li>▪ Increasing confusion and lack of cohesiveness in speech</li> <li>▪ Difficulty staying on topic</li> </ul>
<b>Recalling &amp; Using Words</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Vocabulary more limited</li> <li>▪ Naming difficulty</li> <li>▪ Difficulty remembering meaning of words</li> </ul>



## June at the Late Stage

Last month June moved into a lovely care facility close to Andrea. June seems to like her room, and the people are nice, but every time Andrea gets up to leave June says she wants to go home. Andrea hugs her and tells her the doctor thinks this is the best place for her right now.

Andrea decided to ask one of the staff to stop by just before it is time to go, to spirit June away for a nice cup of tea, so Andrea can leave without upsetting June.



## June at the Late Stage

Sometimes June forgets who Andrea is, so Andrea always greets her with a big smile, a hug, and "Hi, Mom! It's your favourite daughter, Andrea!" This always makes June smile.

They don't have actual conversations anymore, but once in a while June will answer Andrea's questions with "yes" or "no." Andrea tells her about work and her dog, and what the kids have been doing, but mostly they sit together and just enjoy *being* together.



## June at the Late Stage

Andrea brings June's favourite lotion and gently rubs it on her hands, and then she fixes her nail polish. The two of them sit outside and watch the birds at the feeder. Although few words are exchanged, Andrea still feels close to her mother and enjoys being with her.



## Communication at the Late Stage

<b>Comprehension</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Very limited comprehension</li> </ul>
<b>Ways of Communicating</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Difficulty maintaining any conversation</li> <li>▪ The person may seem incomprehensible</li> <li>▪ May stop speaking</li> <li>▪ May repeat words just heard</li> <li>▪ Difficulty maintaining eye contact</li> </ul>
<b>Recalling &amp; Using Words</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Very limited vocabulary</li> <li>▪ Severe naming difficulty</li> </ul>



## Person-Centred Communication

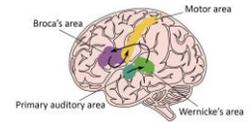
Every person, regardless of their losses, maintains a core of self that can be reached.



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## How Dementia Affects Communication

- Receptive aphasia
  - Difficulty with language “in”
  - Wernicke’s area
- Expressive aphasia
  - Difficulty with language “out”
  - Broca’s area
- Anomia
  - Difficulty finding the right word
  - Mixing up names



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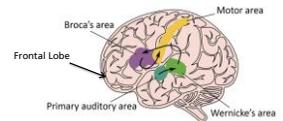
## How Dementia Affects Communication



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## How Dementia Affects Communication

- Alexia
  - Difficulty reading
- Agraphia
  - Difficulty writing
- Inappropriateness
  - Damage to the frontal lobe
  - Loss of “filter”, poor judgment



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## Other Communication Losses

- Ability to pay attention.
- Remembering what they want to say.
- Following along with social conversations or story plots.
- Organizing information and thought processes.

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## Focus on Feelings

*“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”*



- Maya Angelou

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## How Do We Communicate?

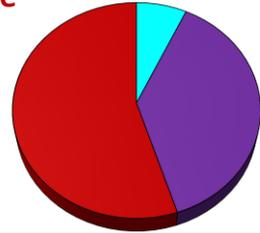


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## Communication of Feelings and Attitudes

**Body Language**

Words



Tone and Pitch of Voice

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## Set the Stage

- Can they hear you?
  - Reduce distractions
- Can they see you?
  - Glasses
  - Well lighted room

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## Get the Person's Attention

- Approach the person slowly from the front
- Do not talk from another room
- Call the person by name
- Make eye contact
- Speak one-on-one
- Touch arm or hand to get their attention

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## Verbal Communication

**Keep  
It  
Short &  
Simple**



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## Speak Slowly and Clearly

- Use simple words
- Speak to the person as an adult
- Lower the pitch of your voice
- Use short sentences

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## One Message at a Time

- Pause
- Allow time for a response
- Put most important information at the end
- One thought = One sentence

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## Demonstrate

- Show as you talk
- Cues are very helpful
- Express feelings with your body
- Warm tone of voice

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## Pay Attention

- Avoid open-ended questions.
- Listen closely with your ears and eyes.
  - What are their words saying?
  - What is their body language saying? Facial expressions?
  - What is their pitch and tone saying?

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## Be Patient

- Avoid arguing
- Take your time
- Ask them if they would like your help
- Repeat as needed

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## Respond to Feelings

- Respond to underlying feelings, not stories.
- Provide a positive distraction if they are upset.
- Use humour when appropriate.
  - Is the person with dementia open to this?
  - Will they feel like you are laughing at them or with them?
- Try not to take things personally.

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## Emphasize the Positive

- Reinforce remaining abilities.
  - Match your expectations with their abilities **today** and at this stage of the disease.
  - Protect from feelings of inadequacy.
  - Avoid reminding them that they have forgotten.
- Emphasize past accomplishments.
- Avoid talking **about** them **in front** of them.

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## Therapeutic Fibbing

- Can be a difficult, but very successful, communication strategy.
- Can take on many different forms:
  - Accepting their reality.
  - Taking the blame for something you didn't do.
  - Revisiting how things might have been in the past.
  - Reassuring them in whatever way works.
  - Saying nothing at all.

## When You Cannot Understand

- Acknowledge what is happening
- Reassure and suggest doing something else



## Activities

- Doing an activity together = communicating
- Encourage involvement in activities



## Things to Do

- set the stage
- one message at a time
- take your time
- repeat
- demonstrate
- pay attention
- be reassuring
- be patient



## Things NOT to Do

- don't order the person
- don't be condescending
- don't ask too many questions
- don't set up unrealistic expectations
- don't talk about the person in front of them
- don't argue



## Keep in Mind

- Feelings remain despite brain damage
- You cannot control the disease or its symptoms; you can only control your reaction to it.



## Suggested Reading

- Talking to Alzheimer's (by Claudia Strauss)
- The 36-Hour Day (by Nancy Mace & Peter Rabins)
- Learning to Speak Alzheimer's (by Joanne Koenig Coste)
- Alzheimer's A – Z (by Jytte Lokvig)

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## Suggested Videos

- Teepa Snow: Phrases to Learn for Caregivers  
Available on YouTube.
- The Nature of Things: Untangling Alzheimer's  
Available on CBC's The Nature of Things website.
- Communication Strategies - Ways to Maximize Success when Communicating with Someone with Dementia  
Available on the brainXchange website.

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## Alzheimer Society of B.C. Programs and Services

**Alzheimer Resource Centres**  
for information, education, support and referrals.

**First Link® Dementia Helpline**  
1-800-936-6033  
604-681-8651 (Lower Mainland)

**Minds in Motion®**  
Weekly exercise and social program for people with early symptoms of dementia and a care partner.

**Support groups**

- For people with early symptoms
- For care partners

### Education

- Getting to Know Dementia
- Shaping the Journey: living with dementia®
- Family Caregiver Series
- Transition to Residential Care
- Dementia Dialogues
- Tele-workshops

### Information bulletins

- First Link® Bulletin
- In Touch for caregivers
- Insight for people with dementia

### Website

www.alzheimerbc.org 39

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## Newsletter & Bulletins



### Contact and eContact

Provide general information about brain health, upcoming events, and other news.



### In Touch

Educational bulletin for caregivers



### Insight

Educational bulletin for and by people with dementia

To subscribe, visit:

[www.alzheimerbc.org/News-and-Events/Newsletters.aspx](http://www.alzheimerbc.org/News-and-Events/Newsletters.aspx)

Or call 604-681-6530 or 1-800-667-3742 (toll free)

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Did you know that the Alzheimer Society of B.C. relies on your generosity to fund its education programs and support services? For information about making a planned gift, either today or in the future, go to:

[www.alzheimer.ca/en/bc/Get-involved/Ways%20to%20donate/Create-a-lasting-legacy](http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/bc/Get-involved/Ways%20to%20donate/Create-a-lasting-legacy)

To review your planned giving options, contact either:

Leona Gonczy or Marilyn Kernahan  
Phone: 604-742-4926 Phone: 604-742-4906

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**Provincial Office** (to order handouts/bulletins)

1-800-667-3742 or 604-681-6530

**Website**

[www.alzheimerbc.org](http://www.alzheimerbc.org)

**First Link® Dementia Helpline**

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