

Communication and People with Down's Syndrome and Dementia

Adults with Down's syndrome and dementia may have difficulty with their communication as their dementia progresses. This can impact on their ability to express their thoughts and feelings, as well as their ability to understand what others are communicating to them.

Communication can be split into two areas:

Expressive Communication

The person's ability to communicate their wants, needs and desires. This can be in the form of:

- Words
- Pictures
- Gesture
- Actions
- Writing
- Signing.

Receptive Communication

The person's ability to understand and process what is being communicated.

How does dementia affect communication?

- People with dementia can appear to forget words e.g. names of people, places or things
- They may find it difficult to express their feelings
- Although they speak fluently, it may not always make sense
- Their reading and writing skills may be affected
- Social conventions may be affected, for example, interrupting people during conversation or ignoring people when spoken to
- Their thought process may be slower
- Their ability to attend to tasks and conversation may be disrupted
- Difficulty following conversation
- Large amounts of information may be difficult to process
- Orientation to time and place may be affected
- Levels of understanding could be compromised.

All these issues will become more obvious and cause difficulties for the person as the dementia progresses.

Difficulties in receptive and/or expressive communication can lead to frustration in the form of behaviours that challenge.

How can you help?

- Encourage the person with dementia to use gestures, pictures and objects to support their message
- If unsure of what the person with dementia is trying to say, use closed, direct questions to establish the message
- Use the person with dementia's name to gain their attention
- Ensure you have established eye contact before interacting (take into consideration any historic reasons as to why the individual might feel uncomfortable with this)
- Be patient and give the person with dementia time to process what is being said and answer (this can be up to 30 seconds or more)
- Keep sentences short
- Use a quiet environment with no distractions when relaying important information
- The use of visual calendars and timetables can help orient the person with dementia
- Make use of gestures, pictures and objects to support what you're saying to the person with dementia
- Clarify the understanding of the person with dementia through use of questions, asking them to relay the information back to you
- Take into consideration, the natural aging process which can affect both hearing and sight
- The use of a communication passport can help the carer of the person with dementia to understand their likes, dislikes and the best communicative practice when interacting with the individual
- A life story is another way to enable the carer and person with dementia to communicate. Please see the life story fact sheet for more information.