

# Dementia Australia

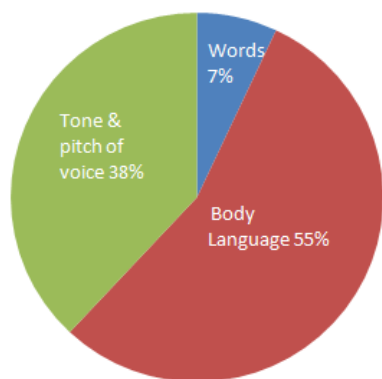
## Communication

The ability to communicate is a critical tool for life as it gives us the ability to form relationships, express our needs and wants and participate in society. When the ability to communicate is impaired or lost, our entire social history and network is affected. If we cannot communicate, we cannot fully participate in society.

Communication is a complex process involving words, body language, tone of voice, as well as, memory and attention. Dementia causes a progressive loss of communication skills. This is because the loss of memory impacts our ability to remember words and their meanings. Consequently, people with dementia have increased difficulty using words to express themselves and understanding what others say.

The **way** we say something is far more important than **what** we say (or the words we use). This is especially important in dementia. Because of this, how we use our body language and tone of voice become more important when communicating with someone who has dementia.

Communication is made up of three parts:



Words make up only 7% of our overall message. Body language and tone of voice convey more meaning than words.

Communication difficulties are common in Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. Changes to communication include:

- Difficulty finding the right word or remembering names.
- Difficulty following instructions.
- Reduced concentration and attention.
- Reduced eye contact.
- Loss of interest in conversation.
- Speech is mumbled or consists of 'made up' words.
- Loss of reading and writing skills.
- Repetition of phrases, questions or words

### Techniques to Improve Communication

- Reduce background noise (turn off the TV or radio).
- Ensure there is good lighting and you can see each other's face while talking.
- Use short and simple sentences. Focus on one piece of information at a time.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Ask questions that require a yes or no answer, give two options e.g. "Would you like juice or water?"
- Give the person with dementia extra time for the words to sink in and for the person to respond.
- If the person with dementia does not respond, they may not have heard or understood. Repeat or reword your question but keep it simple.

- Smile, be friendly and approachable. Try to stay calm and not get frustrated.

## **Alternative Ways to Communicate**

- Touch. This is the most underestimated communication tool there is. Holding hands, gentle stroking and a simple hug will often say more than a thousand words.
- Go for a walk together. Just being together and sharing a moment is communicating.
- Reminisce. Looking at family photos or listening to music can bring back 'feel good' emotions.
- Eat meals together. Most communication and socialising occurs during mealtimes and it provides an opportunity to relax and enjoy a familiar activity.

## **Considerations**

Communication difficulties can produce frustration and confusion for both the listener and the person with dementia. There are many techniques that can be learnt to assist the person with dementia understand others, as well as, express their needs and wants.

It is absolutely vital to continue to communicate in whatever way possible, even if the person with dementia is no longer talking.

Being flexible in your approach is most crucial. Most of us take the ability to communicate for granted. It takes time to communicate effectively, allow even more time for people with dementia.