



## Dementia and Aphasia

### What is Dementia?

Dementia is a term used to describe various physical diseases that affect the brain. The disease causes the structure of the brain to change and this leads to the loss of some brain cells. Since Dementia is a progressive disease, over time, more parts of the brain become damaged and symptoms become more severe. Symptoms of Dementia include memory loss, confusion and problems with speech and understanding (Aphasia).

### How does Dementia affect a person's communication?

The extent of the communication problems experienced by people with Dementia depends on the severity of the Dementia. Someone in the early stages of the illness may have milder communication problems than a person with advanced Dementia.

A person with Dementia may have the following communication problems:

- may say a great deal but it may not convey any meaning
- difficulty concentrating on tasks or conversation topics
- remembering new or old information and events
- understanding words
- expressing thoughts and feelings

As Dementia progresses, communication becomes less verbal. People rely on body language and tone of voice to understand what others are saying and to express their own feelings, needs and wants.

### How can I improve communication with someone who has Dementia?

People with Dementia can find it **difficult to concentrate on conversations or certain tasks**, such as making a cup of tea. They can become easily distracted or forget what they are doing.

#### *Tips*

- Make sure you have the person's full attention before you speak to them.
- Make sure they can see you clearly.
- Make eye contact with them. This will help them to focus on you.
- Minimise background noise and other distractions, such as the radio, TV or other people's conversations.
- Allow them to finish what they are saying before you respond.

People with Dementia have **short term memory problems** and may find it difficult to remember new information or events. For example, they may forget what they had for breakfast or the date and time of a doctor's appointment. Long term memory is largely unaffected and therefore people with Dementia tend to remember things that happened much earlier in their lives, such as where they went to school.

### *Tips*

- Make use of memory aids, such as post-it notes, electronic memos, white boards and calendars.
- If they keep asking the same question, try writing the answer down for them.
- Try not to ask questions that rely on new memories, such as "What did you have for breakfast?" or "How old is your granddaughter?"
- Remind them where they are and what time it is. An orientation board might be useful, listing the date, time and weather.
- Remind them tactfully what they were talking about during the conversation.
- Make familiar music and pictures available.
- Create a 'Memory Album', a record in words and pictures of the important parts of their life, from when they were young right through to the present day. As new life events occur, they can be added to the album. Have a look at the Speakability Website for ideas on creating a personalised communication book. There is an example book on the Website called 'A Book about Me' (see Aphasia Information section).

People with Dementia may have **difficulty finding the right words**, especially the names of objects. They may use the wrong word or they might not be able to find any word at all.

### *Tips*

- Give the person plenty of time to talk. Do not press them to remember the right word unless you need it to understand what they are saying.
- If the person has difficulty finding the right word or finishing a sentence, ask them to explain it in a different way.
- If they are struggling to speak, suggest other ways of expressing themselves, such as drawing, gesture or pointing.
- Avoid asking open-ended questions, such as "What do you want to drink?" Instead ask, "Do you want tea?", and encourage them to use thumbs up or thumbs down signs to indicate 'yes' or 'no'.
- Instead of reacting to their actual words, learn to read the underlying meaning of their message and interpret what they really mean. Try to explore the thought or the feeling underlying what they are trying to say. Look for clues in their facial expression, tone of voice and behaviour.
- Humour can help bring you closer together and make you both feel more relaxed. Laughing together about misunderstandings and mistakes can sometimes help.

- If you find their speech hard to understand, use what you know about them to interpret what they might be trying to say. Always check with them to see if you are right.

People with Dementia can experience **difficulty understanding the meaning of words** when you are talking to them. Instead, they will rely on your body language, tone of voice and behaviour. People with Dementia tend to be able to understand body language better than words.

### *Tips*

- Minimise background noise and distractions.
- Make sure that you have the person's full attention before you speak.
- Speak slowly and clearly, and avoid speaking sharply or raising your voice.
- Remain calm and still while you communicate because they will be reading your body language. This shows them that you are giving them your full attention and that you have time for them.
- Break down complex information into short, simple sentences and repeat what you have said. Reduce each message into one piece of information at a time.
- Allow them time. They will need longer than previously to understand what you are communicating to them.
- Use phrases with a direct meaning. For example, "It is raining heavily" rather than "It is raining cats and dogs".
- Say things in context, if possible. For example, ask about what drink they would like when you are both near the kettle.
- Ask only one question at a time.
- Use simple words.
- Make your message easier to understand by using pictures, objects, gestures and body language.
- Misunderstandings can sometime occur. When this happens, try repeating the message. If this does not help, simplify the message into smaller pieces of information.
- Use touch and gestures, such as pointing to an object, to help get your message across or to replace words altogether.

Further information and support can be obtained from the following organisations:

**Alzheimer's Society**

Devon House  
58 St Katharine's Way  
London  
E1W 1LB

Telephone: 020 7423 3500  
Helpline: 0845 300 0336 (Mon – Fri, 8.30am – 6.30pm)  
Email: [enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk)  
Website: [www.alzheimers.org.uk](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk)

**Carers UK**

20 Great Dover Street  
London  
SE1 4LX

Telephone: 080 8808 7777 (Carers Line)  
Email: [info@carersuk.org](mailto:info@carersuk.org)  
Website: [www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)

Information for this fact sheet was taken from the Alzheimer's Society booklet *Talking to a person with Dementia: Information for relatives and carers*. For further information, please contact the Alzheimer's Society on the number above.