



Compassionate Communication with a family member who has a memory problem

Do:

- Give short, one sentence explanations.
- Repeat instructions or sentences exactly the same way.
- Allow plenty of time for comprehension.
- Eliminate “but” from your vocabulary; substitute “nevertheless”.
- Agree with them or distract them to a different subject or activity.
- Accept the blame when something’s wrong (even if it’s fantasy).
- Leave the room, if necessary, to avoid confrontations.
- Respond to the feelings rather than the words.
- Be patient, cheerful, and reassuring. Go with the flow.
- *Elevate your level of generosity and graciousness.*

Don’t:

- Don’t reason
- Don’t argue
- Don’t confront
- Don’t remind them that they forget
- Don’t take it personally!

**Alzheimer’s Association
Norther California
East Bay Office**

3675 Mt. Diablo Blvd. Suite 250
Lafayette, CA 94549
(925)284-7942
(800)272-3900

Remember:

- They are not crazy or lazy. They are saying normal things, and doing normal things, for someone with a memory problem. If they were doing things, or saying things, to deliberately aggravate you, they would have a different diagnosis.
- Some days they’ll seem normal, but they’re not. Their reality is now different than yours and you cannot change them. You can’t control the disease. You can only control your reaction to it.
- Their disability is memory loss. They cannot remember and can’t remember that they cannot remember. They’ll ask you the same question over and over believing it’s the first time they’ve asked.

- They do not hide things; they protect things by putting them in a safe place. Do not take “stealing” accusations personally.
- *They are scared all the time.* Each patient reacts differently to fear. They may become passive, uncooperative, hostile, angry, verbally abusive, or physically combative. They may even do them all at different times, or alternate between them. Anxiety may compel them to shadow you (follow everywhere).

*Call the helpline if you need
suggestions on handling challenging situations.
(800) 272-3900*

“Once dementia is diagnosed, the patient is excused 100% of the time.”

- Adapted from Alzheimer’s: A Handbook for the Caretaker
by Eileen H. Driscoll, RN (Branden Publishing Company 1994)

Examples:

Don’t reason.

Patient: “What doctor’s appointment? There’s nothing wrong with me.”

Don’t: (reason) “You’ve been seeing the doctor every three months for the last two years. It’s written on the calendar and I told you about it yesterday and this morning.”

Do: (short explanation) “It’s just a regular check-up.”
(accept blame) “I’m sorry if I forgot to tell you.”

Don’t take it personally.

Patient: “Who are you? Where’s my husband?”

Don’t: (take it personally) “What do you mean who’s your husband? I am!”

Do: (go with the flow, reassure) “He’ll be here for dinner.”
(distract) “How about some milk and cookies? ...Would you like chocolate chip or oatmeal?”

Don’t argue.

Patient: “I didn’t write this check for \$500. Someone at the bank is forging my signature!”

Don’t: (argue) “What? Don’t be silly! The bank wouldn’t be forging your signature.”

Do: (respond to feelings) “That’s a scary thought.”
(reassure) “I’ll make sure they don’t do that.”
(distract) “Would you help me fold the towels?”

Do repeat exactly.

Patient: "I'm going to the store for a newspaper."

Don't: (repeat differently) "Please put your shoes on."... "You'll need to put your shoes on."

Do: (repeat exactly) "Please put your shoes on." ... "Please put your shoes on."

Don't confront.

Patient: "Nobody's going to make decisions for me. You can go now... and don't come back!"

Don't: (confront) "I'm not going anywhere and you can't remember enough to make your own decisions."

Do: (accept blame or respond to feelings) "I'm sorry this is a tough time."
(reassure) "I love you and we're going to get through this together."
(distract) "You know what? Don has a new job. He's really excited about it."

Eliminate "but", substitute nevertheless.

Patient: "I'm not eating this, I hate chicken."

Don't: (say "but") "I know chicken's not your favorite food, but it's what we're having for dinner."

Do: (say "nevertheless") "I know chicken's not your favorite food, (smile) nevertheless I'd appreciate it if you'd eat a little bit."

Don't remind them that they're forgetting.

Patient: "Joe hasn't called for a long time. I hope he's okay."

Don't: (remind) "Joe called yesterday and you talked to him for 15 minutes."

Do: (reassure) "You really like talking to Joe, don't you?"
(distract) "Let's call him when we get back from our walk."

Don't ask questions of recent memory.

Patient: "Hello, Susie, I see you brought a friend with you!"

Don't: (question memory) "Hi Mom. You remember Eric, don't you? ...What did you do today?"

Do: (short explanation) "Hi Mom. You look wonderful! This is Eric. We work together."