

Communicating with people who have memory difficulties

“He/she says things which are not true”.

For example, someone in their own home may think that they are in someone else’s home, or they have got to get up for work when in fact they retired ten years ago. Ideas are forming in the mind, but the person is having difficulty organising those ideas and making proper sense of them.

Drawing attention to mistakes often causes distress and anxiety. It can help if you sensitively change the subject or you could say something that incorporates the truth but does not criticise what the person has just said. For example, if the person says he has got to get up for work you could say, “It’s nice being retired. We don’t have to get up so early now”. It is trial and error finding out what works best for you and causes the least upset all round.

“He/she tells me the same thing or asks the same question over and over”.

This is one of the biggest problems experienced by people with memory difficulties. The same idea keeps forming in the mind and the person keeps forgetting that he has already expressed that idea.

Telling the person that they have just repeated themselves is not usually helpful. Some carers have found that it helps to answer questions briefly and then try to distract the person from the idea. For example, you could ask them to do a simple task such as sorting out the cutlery drawer or helping to dry the dishes.

He/she starts to say something and then forgets what they were talking about”.

We have all had the experience of forgetting the idea we had in mind when halfway through a sentence. This happens more frequently when someone has memory problems.

It can help to remind the person of what they were saying, for example “You were telling me about.....”.

“He/she struggles to think of the names of things”.

Give the person lots of time to think of the words they need. If the person gets stuck and you think you know the word, it often reduces stress and anxiety if you suggest the forgotten word.

“He/she talks constantly and uses lots of wrong words and they are all jumbled up”.

If the person is constantly talking it helps to engage them in a task to keep them occupied, for example laying the table.

Often being aware of the person’s body language, facial expression and emotional tone of voice can help if you are unable to interpret what the person is saying.

He does not understand what I have said to him”.

Changing the environment and the way you speak can help the person understand better.

Setting the scene

First try to get eye contact. Calling the person’s name or touching their arm can help with this. Sit or stand close to the person so you can be seen and heard more clearly. Reduce any distractions, for example turn off the TV and radio. This will make your conversation easier.

Making the message clearer

Use short, simple sentences. Try not to use more words than you need, for example “I’ve been standing by the cooker all day long making that cake you really love. It’s the cake Maggie gave me the recipe for last year. Would you like a piece now or later?” It might be easier if you just say, “I’ve made your favourite cake, would you like a piece?”

Speak slowly and clearly.

Give time for each short sentence to get through.

Repeat it if the person has not understood.

Emphasise important words. “I’ve made your FAVOURITE CAKE”.

If possible, point to the object or person you are talking about when you mention them in conversation, for example show the person the cake or photograph.

When asking questions, questions that require a simple “yes” or “no” are often the best, for example “would you like coffee?”

Use concrete words, for example “get married” rather than “tie the knot”. “It is pouring down with rain” rather than “it’s raining cats and dogs”. People with memory difficulties often take things literally.

It may help the person to understand if the words are written down, for example if talking about relatives it may help to write down the name of the person you are talking about.

If the person is upset or tired, their understanding may appear worse – it may be worth avoiding difficult conversations or questions at such times.

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