

# Compassionate Communication with the Memory Impaired

By Liz Ayres: A volunteer of the Alzheimer's Association and former caregiver

## Don't

Don't reason.  
Don't argue  
Don't confront  
Don't remind them they forget  
Don't question recent memory  
Don't take it personally

Ooops! You must be kidding  
You mean I can't reason???  
or argue???. Or remind...???



## 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 is wrong (even if it's fantasy)  
Leave the room, if necessary to avoid confrontations

Respond to the feelings rather than the words  
Be patient and cheerful and reassuring, to avoid confrontations

Respond to feelings rather than the words  
Be patient and cheerful and reassuring. Do go with the flow  
My appeal to you: **Please elevate your level of generosity and graciousness.**



Hmmm...accept the blame?  
This is going to be tough!

## Remember

You can't control memory loss, only your reaction to it. ***Compassionate communication will significantly heighten the quality of life.*** They are not crazy or lazy. They say normal things, and doing normal things, for a memory impaired, dementia individual. If they were deliberately trying to exasperate you, they would have a different diagnosis. Forgive them...always. For example: they don't hide things; they protect them in safe places...and then forget. Don't take 'stealing' accusations personally.

Their disability is memory loss. Asking them to remember is like asking a blind person to read. ("Did you take your pills?" "What did you do today?") Don't ask and don't test memory! A loss of this magnitude reduces the capacity to reason. Expecting them to be reasonable or to accept your conclusion is unrealistic. ("You need a shower." "Day care will be fun." "You can't live alone.") Don't try to reason or convince them. Give a one sentence explanation or search for creative solutions. Memory loss produces unpredictable emotions, thought, and behavior, which you can alleviate by resolving all issues **peacefully**. Don't argue, correct, contradict, confront, blame or insist.

Reminders are rarely kind. They tell the patient how disabled they are – over and over again. Reminders of the recent past imply, "I remember, I'm okay; you don't, you're not." *Ouch!* Refer only to the present or the future. (If they're hungry, don't inform them they ate an hour ago, offer a snack or set a time to eat soon.) They may ask the same question repeatedly, believing each time is the first. Graciously respond as if it's the first time. Some days they seem normal, but they're not. They live in a different reality. Reminders won't bring them into yours. **Note:** For vascular dementia, giving clues **may** help their recall. If it doesn't work, be kind...don't remind. Ethical dilemmas may occur. If, for instance, the patient thinks a dead spouse is alive, and truthful reminders will create sadness, what should you do? To avoid distress, try these ways of kindness: 1) distract to another topic, or 2) start a fun activity, or 3) reminisce about their spouse, "I was just thinking about \_\_\_\_\_. How did you meet?" or you might try, "He's gone for a while. Let's take our walk now." Open ended questions ("Where shall we go?" "What do you want to eat/wear/do?") are surprisingly complex and create anxiety. Give them a simple choice between two items or direct their choice, "You look great in the red blouse."

***They are scared all the time.*** Each patient reacts differently to fear. They become passive, uncooperative, hostile, angry, agitated, 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). Anxiety compels them to resist changes in routine, even pleasant ones. *Your goal is to reduce anxiety whenever possible. Also, they cant remember your reassurances. Keep saying them.*

**If you need suggestions on handling challenging situations call  
the Alzheimer's Association at 858-492-4400 or 800-272-3900**

## 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 checkup."  
(accept blame) "I'm sorry if I forgot to tell you."

### 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?"

### 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."

### Don't remind them they forget.

**Patient:** "Joe hasn't called in a long time. I hope he's ok"

**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 question recent memory.

**Patient:** "Hello, Mary. I see you've 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."

### 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 take it personally!

**Patient:** "Who are you? Where is 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?"

Who me? Take it personally?  
Of course not! Well, Maaaybe...



### Do 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."