

08/2025

Communicating with a Person with Dementia

Dementia and its progression can affect communication, behavior and emotional expression. As dementia becomes more common, it is important for everyone to know how to respectfully and compassionately interact with someone living with dementia in everyday situations—whether as a family member, neighbour, volunteer or professional.

Understanding the Symptoms of Dementia

A person's emotions and needs do not disappear with dementia. Even if the disease has progressed, they are still the same individual with their own personality. Understanding the symptoms of dementia helps create more supportive encounters. A caring attitude and acceptance lay the foundation for dementia-friendly interactions.

Tips for Communicating with a Person with Dementia

- **Be positive and show respect** – see the person behind the illness.
- **Give time and peace** – avoid noise, and explain what is happening and why.
- **Listen and make eye contact** – be yourself and emotionally present.
- **Communicate clearly** – speak respectfully, adult to adult.
- **Respect independence** – don't do things for the person unnecessarily.
- **Support success** – everyone wants to feel useful and capable.

Staying Connected

As dementia progresses, speech may slow or become difficult, but the desire to be understood remains. It's important to continue communication even when fewer words are spoken.

Ways to maintain and strengthen connection include:

Speech: Using the person's native language, familiar words, and simple sentences can aid understanding.

Images: Help clarify the message and support choices or opinions when speech is difficult.



Touch: Conveys care and presence and helps guide daily activities.

Nonverbal communication: Facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice strengthen the message.

Avoid phrases like “Don’t you remember?” or “Have you forgotten again?”—they are not helpful. If the person remembers things differently, avoid unnecessary correction. It is often best to go along with and accept their version.

Responding to Behavioral Changes

A person with dementia may sometimes become frustrated or restless. Emotions and needs may also be expressed more openly than before. These changes are not intentional; they result from changes in the brain caused by the illness.

A clear routine, familiar structure, and fulfilling basic needs provide a sense of security. This also supports the person’s well-being and may help reduce behavioral symptoms like anxiety, aggression or hallucinations.

To ease discomfort you can try the following individually

- Pleasant activities and reminiscing create joyful and meaningful moments.
- Daily physical activity supports functional ability.
- Regular meals and sufficient hydration help with energy and well-being.

Even if the person cannot always express emotions clearly, they still have the right to feel them. Accept the ups and downs of good and bad days. If something doesn’t work today, it might work better tomorrow. As dementia progresses, even short, successful encounters are meaningful and bring joy.



More Information and Support

More information about communicating with a person with dementia on Muistiliitto’s website:
www.muistiliitto.fi

Peer support and activities: Local memory associations and their Muistiluotsi expert and support centers
Muistineuvo support helpline is available in Finnish at **09 8766 550**