

Tips for Communicating with Older Adults

Your Arrival

- Time visits with older people according to their schedule. Try and avoid mealtimes, outings and appointments, or favourite activities.
- Be sure to knock, wait, introduce yourself, and explain why you are there.
- Look at the older person and make eye contact. If you feel comfortable, offer a handshake to help make the initial introduction.
- Greet the older person warmly and ask whether now is a good time to visit.

The Environment

- Stand where the person can easily see and hear you. Make sure you have their attention.
- Consider the setting. Eliminate visual and auditory distractions as much as possible.
- Ensure that the light is not shining into the person's eyes; if necessary, close the blinds with their permission.
- Avoid sitting on the older person's bed. Try to find a chair.

The Conversation

- Speak in a tone of voice appropriate for communicating with an adult. Do not be condescending.
- Keep communication simple but adult. Sometimes it may be necessary to simplify your sentence structure and reduce your rate of speech.
- Do not speak more loudly than normal, but do emphasize key words.
- Make an effort to remember the older person's name and use it in conversation.
- Express interest in the older person and in whatever they wish to discuss. Let them direct the conversation and take the lead.
- Give the older person time to respond in conversations. Be comfortable with silence.
- Never assume or suggest that you know how the older person feels. Everyone experiences situations differently.
- Conduct yourself in an open, honest, and respectful manner.
- Remember that you are not there to fix people's problems; you are there as a supportive listener and conversation partner.

Tips for Communicating with Hearing-Impaired Older Adults

- Be sure to get the older person's attention before you start to speak.
- Ensure that the older person can see your face clearly so that they can read your lips, facial expression, or body language.
- If the older person's hearing is better in one ear, try to sit on that side.
- Recognize that hearing-impaired people hear and understand less well when they are tired, ill, or depressed.
- Do not shout or exaggerate your speech; this distorts your lips and facial movements.
- If the older person has difficulty understanding you, rephrase rather than repeat your remarks.
- Articulate clearly and at a moderate speed. If appropriate, use gestures, pictures, and other visual aids when necessary.

Tips for Communicating with Vision-Impaired Older Adults

- Always speak to the older person and tell them your name so they know you are there.
- Describe any objects you are referring to and/or using.
- Use the image of a clock face as a precise way to describe the position of objects in relation to the older person.
- Do not move things around or make adjustments to objects or the physical environment without consent from the older person.
- Touching is often helpful; it can calm, give reassurance, and show that you care; however, be sensitive to "hands off" clues.
- You do not have to talk all the time; visually-impaired older people may appreciate being read to, or simply having good company.

Tips for Communicating with Aphasic Older Adults

- One-on-one communication is usually best.
- Communicate one idea at a time.
- Speak in a direct, natural, and clear way. Use simple words and sentences in a respectful tone.
- Use yes/no questions or those that can be answered by a nod or shake of the head
- Often people with aphasia use unusual words, almost a language of their own. If possible, try to learn this.
- Give the older person time to both talk and respond.
- Become familiar with and use communication boards (should they have one).
- In addition to speech, encourage and use other modes of communication, such as writing, drawing, gestures, visual aids, miming, pointing, communication books/boards, objects from the environment, and facial expressions. Whatever works to enhance meaningful communication, use it.

Tips for Communication with Confused or Disoriented Older Adults

- Introduce yourself each time you see the older person, no matter how frequently you see them, or how recent your last visit.
- Refer to the date, time, and location to help keep the older person oriented.
- Talk to the older person about current events and upcoming plans.
- If an older person's conversation does not make sense to you, try to listen to the emotion or general topic behind the words. Are the words related to a common topic? Do they indicate a certain emotion?
- Long term memory is often stronger in older people than is short term memory. Ask questions about their past rather than questions about what they did today or last week.
- Watch for signs that you may be losing the older person's attention. Wait until you regain their attention before speaking again.
- Do not rush or push the older person to interact.

Suggestions for Conversation Starters and Topics with Older Adults

Many older people will tell you that they do not have a story to tell, but after a few questions, a great story will often emerge. Remember, no matter whom you are talking with or what special considerations are required, each person has their own history, story, and life to share. To help you start or continue a conversation, try combining yes/no and open/closed-ended questions with these suggested topics:

- Sports, Games, and Hobbies –what was your favourite? Which were you best at?
- Hometown –where were you born? Did you grow up there? What was it like?
- School days –did you have a least favourite teacher? Did you have a favourite subject?
- Family –what were your parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters like?
- Animals –did you ever have pets? What were they?
- Firsts –do you remember your first drive? Date? Kiss?
- Favourites –do you have a favourite movie? Actor? Song? Book?
- Vacations and Traveling –where have you been? What was your most memorable?
- Seasons –which was your favourite? What did you do in the Spring? Winter? Fall? Summer?
- Marriage –did you get married? How did you meet? Where was your honeymoon?
- Home –where have you lived? Which was your favourite?
- Gardening – do you have a garden? What do you grow?
- Work –what type of work did you do? Where was it? Did you get paid?
- Celebrations and Traditions –which holiday and family tradition is your favourite?

For more information,
please visit our website:
[www.familymed.ubc.ca/
geriatrics.htm](http://www.familymed.ubc.ca/geriatrics.htm)

The suggestions and tips presented in this pamphlet are excerpted from “*Meaningful Communication with Older Adults: A Care for Elders Guide*”. This twenty-six page booklet can be viewed and downloaded from UBC’s Department of Family Practice, Division of Community Geriatrics webpage www.familymed.ubc.ca/Family_Practice_Home.htm.

Adapted and/or used with permission from:
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A Care for Elders Guide



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