

# Compassionate Communication with the Memory Impaired

by Liz Ayres

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## DO NOT

- Do not try to reason.
- Do not argue.
- Do not confront
  
- Do not remind them that they forget.
- Do not question their recent memory.
- Do not take it personally!

## DO

- Give short, one sentence explanations.
- Repeat instructions or sentences exactly the same way the second time.
- 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 is a fantasy).
- Leave the room, if necessary, to avoid confrontations.
  
- Respond to the feeling rather than the words.
- Be patient, cheerful and reassuring. Go with the flow.
- My appeal to you is: Please elevate your level of generosity and graciousness.

## REMEMBER

- They are not crazy or lazy. They are saying and doing normal things – for a memory impaired person with dementia. If they were doing or saying things to deliberately aggravate you, they would have a different diagnosis.
- Some days they seem normal but they are *not*. Their reality is now different than yours, and *you cannot change them*. You cannot control the disease. You can only control *your reaction* to what it does to them.
- Their disability is memory loss. They cannot remember – and *they cannot remember that they cannot remember*. They will ask the same question over and over – thinking it is the first time they have asked it.
- *They do not hide things*. They protect things by putting them in a safe place – and then forgetting that they did that. Do not take it personally when they accuse you of stealing.
- *They are frightened all the time*. Each person reacts differently to fear. They may become passive, uncooperative, hostile, angry, agitated verbally abusive, or physically combative. They may do them all at different times – or alternate between them. Anxiety may compel them to shadow you (follow you everywhere). They cannot remember your reassurances. Keep saying the calming and reassuring thing to them.

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

Alzheimer’s: A Handbook for the Caretaker,  
Eileen H. Driscoll, R.N., Branden Publishing  
CO., 1994.

# Examples of Compassionate Communication

## Do Not Reason

**Patient:** "What doctor's appointment? There's nothing wrong with me."

**Do not reason:** "You've been seeing the doctor every three months for the last two years. It's on the calendar, and I told you about it yesterday and this morning."

**Do offer a short explanation:** "It's just a regular check up."

**Accept blame:** "I'm sorry if I forgot to tell you."

## Do Not Question Recent Memory

**Patient:** "Hello Mary. I see you've brought a friend with you."

**Do not question memory:** "Hi mom! You remember Eric, don't you? What did you do today?"

**Do short intro:** "Hi Mom, you look wonderful! This is Eric. We work together."

## Do Not Argue

**Patient:** "I didn't write this check for \$500. Someone at the bank is forging my signature."

**Do not reason:** "What? Don't be silly! The bank wouldn't be forging your signature."

**Do respond to feelings:** "That's a scary thought."

**Do reassure:** "I'll make sue they don't do that."

**Accept, redirect:** "Will you help me fold the towels?"

## Do Not Take It Personally

**Patient:** "Who are you? Where's my husband?"

**Do not take it personally:** "What do you mean – who's your husband? I am!"

**Go with the flow and reassure:** "He'll be late for dinner."

**Do distract:** "How about some milk and cookies. I'm going to have a chocolate chip cookie. Will you eat one with me?"

## Do Not Confront

**Patient:** "Nobody's going to make decisions for me."

**Do not confront:** "I'm not going anywhere, and you can't remember enough to make your own decisions."

**Do respond to feelings:** "I'm sorry this is a tough time."

**Do reassure:** "I love that we're going to get through this together."

**Accept redirect:** "You know what? Don has a new job. He's really excited about it!"

## Do Repeat Exactly

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

**Do not repeat differently:** "Please put your shoes on. You'll need to put your shoes on."

**Do repeat the same way:** "Please put your shoes on. Please put your shoes on."

## Do Not Remind Them That They Forget

**Patient:** "Joe hasn't called for a long time. I hope he is OK."

**Do not remind:** "Joe called yesterday, and you talked with him for 15 minutes."

**Do reassure:** "You really like talking to Joe don't you?"

**Accept redirect:** "Let's call him when we get back from our walk."

## Do Eliminate "But"; Substitute "Nevertheless"

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

**Do not say "but":** "I know chicken is not your favorite food, *but* it's what we're having for dinner."

**Do say "nevertheless":** "I know chicken is not your favorite food, (smile) *nevertheless*, I'd appreciate it if you'd eat a little bit with me!"