



Communication in Caregiving for Elderlies

Why is communication important in caregiving?

During caregiving, misunderstandings or disagreements between caregivers and care recipients are likely to arise. The elderly may struggle to hear or understand others and it can be frustrating for them to express their thoughts as well.

On the other hand, the caregiver may also feel frustrated by the struggle to communicate with the elderly in their care. Communication problems can lead older people to withdraw and become isolated, which often causes further loss of communication.

Communicating effectively promotes the caregiving relationship and helps reduce misunderstandings, conflicts and stress.

Causes of communication problems

➤ Temporary / reversible causes

- **Medicines**
 - Some medicines can cause confusion or fatigue, which can make communicating and understanding others difficult.
 - Changing the medicine dosage, or the medicine itself, often can eliminate these problems.
- **Noisy environments**
 - E.g. near construction sites; bus interchanges; busy waiting room in a clinic.
- **Speech & hearing challenges**
 - Difficulties understanding regional / ethnic accents
 - For the older adult, dry mouth or poorly fitting dentures can affect clarity of speech.



➤ Permanent causes

- Structural or neurological damage from strokes, brain lesions (*such as tumours*), and diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.
- While these disorders tend to cause permanent impairments, there are many strategies that can help the patient and the caregiver cope with the situation.

Identifying and solving communication disorders

As with most changes that take place with aging, communication problems are likely to develop slowly. People usually seek medical treatment when their problems interfere with their ability to do their daily tasks. What is a communication problem for one person may not be for another.

For example, vision problems that make reading and writing difficult may create frustration for those who have spent much of their time reading magazines and corresponding by mail. On the other hand, for people who have not spent much time reading and writing, the same difficulty may not be as important.

Tips to enhance communication in caregiving

➤ Active listening

- Listen patiently and provide brief responses such as “okay” and “I see” to show that you hear and understand what the care recipient is sharing with you.
- Avoid dominating the conversation.
- Ask questions to better understand their thoughts, opinion and feelings.

➤ Appropriate speed and tone of talking

- Adjust the speed and tone of talking according to the elder's need.



➤ Use simple words and short sentences where required

➤ Non-verbal communication

- Eye contact :
 - Keep eye contact.
- Facial expression :
 - Reflect different moods.
- Posture and gesture :
 - Nodding, appropriate movements, appropriate positioning of chairs.
 - Try to sit face-to-face.
- Touch :
 - Holding hands, patting the hand, embracing (*appropriately*).
- Use of diagrams and actual objects :
 - To ask an elder with impairment of language function to take a bath, make use of the picture of a shower.
 - Communication is a two-way street. Conversation is a cooperative effort and all parties are responsible in improving it.



- Communication problems may require adjusting to new limitations and possibly reducing expectations. Not all communication problems can be solved completely. For example, poor hearing may make it impossible to carry out a conversation unless the room is quiet and the person is wearing a hearing aid. That does not mean communication has to stop. It just means that the conversation may need to take a creative stance.
- In communicating with elders, we must try to be understanding and to be adept at expressing ourselves. The effect of communication is the result of mutual influence, just like a mirror. The accomplishment of good communication relies on effort from both parties.