

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH ELDER ADULTS

Effective communication skills are essential for building relationships and navigating everyday life. As we age, effective communication can become increasingly challenging. Understanding the barriers that can hinder communication is the first step to effectively communicating with people of any age. (NIH, 2015)

Types of Communication (Merriam Webster, 2015):

- ◆ Verbal Communication
 - Spoken words
- ◆ Nonverbal Communication
 - Eye contact
 - Body language
 - Tone of voice
 - Facial expressions
- ◆ Written Communication
 - Pen and paper
 - Pamphlets
 - Diagrams
 - Pictures

Barriers to Effective Communication (HG, 2015):

- ◆ **Time constraints:** It can take longer for older individuals to process information, so be sure to set aside ample time when conversing. This is especially important when giving instructions.
- ◆ **Distractions:** Having the TV on or being in a loud area can further impede the ability of older individuals to hear and understand what is being said.
- ◆ **Low lighting:** Individuals that have vision loss may require more lighting in order

to see you while you converse. This way they can pick up on your body language and expressions to gather more information.

- ◆ **Inconsistent body language:** When we converse, our body language tells a story. While you may be listening and engaged in the conversation, doing things like crossing your arms or not making eye contact can suggest that you are not interested.
- ◆ **Excessive emotion:** Whatever emotion you are expressing, it can sometimes block your ability to be understood by the other person. An example of this is if you are very excited, your tone of voice can be higher pitched and you might talk much faster than average, making it harder for you to be heard and understood.

Tips for Effective Communication (ASHA, 2015):

- ◆ Go somewhere quiet with minimal distractions, turning off music or TVs.
- ◆ Talk somewhere that is well lit, especially around your face and mouth. This will allow individuals to watch your body language, and even read your lips.
- ◆ Speak slowly and clearly.
- ◆ Try to lower your tone of voice if you have a higher pitched voice. Lower pitches are easier to hear and understand, especially if someone has a hearing device.



- ◆ Start the conversation with something light or familiar.
- ◆ Allow the other person to know when you are changing subjects by pausing or prompting them on the new topic.
- ◆ Be aware of your body language. Studies have found that sitting face to face with someone and keeping eye contact is one of the best ways to effectively communicate.
- ◆ If someone does not understand what you are saying and you have repeated it several times, try to describe it in a different way.
- ◆ Keep your voice at a normal volume; do not shout or yell.
- ◆ Do not interrupt; allow the other person to speak and listen carefully.
- ◆ When giving instructions, ask the individual to repeat things back to you, as well as requesting them to summarize what they were told. If they are unable to repeat it back, take another approach, like writing out directions or demonstrating it for them.

- ◆ Open ended questions can be difficult, so try giving the individual two options. If this is still too difficult, try asking “yes” or “no” questions.
- ◆ If you or the other individual is becoming frustrated because they cannot express themselves, take a deep breath, giving both of you a moment in silence to help refocus.

For more information on specific conditions that can further complicate communication, along with tips on how to achieve better communication, take a look at Implications of Medical Conditions on Communications.

Disclaimer:

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