

Wellness Articles

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Improve communication with loved ones suffering from dementia

Conversation can be challenging with a friend or family member suffering from dementia. Improving communication can make a world of difference.

Albertan Joan Spinney is a 94-year-old resident living in continuing care. She has a lifetime of experiences to share, but significant hearing loss and an Alzheimer's diagnosis makes conversation difficult. She is unable to understand questions or follow instructions without her hearing aids, which were misplaced several months ago.

Staff and family were already using communication strategies like making eye contact with Spinney, reducing distractions, and using slower speech. Speech language pathologist, Saige Strangway, suggested some new tools. She encouraged the use of a memory book to share stories and placed labels in Spinney's room to act as a guide and reminders. Strangway also introduced an amplification device called a PocketTalker.

Spinney's son-in-law came to visit after Strangway had introduced the communications tools. The visit was memorable. Joan and her son-in-law shared jokes, stories, and reviewed her old school work together.

Spinney is known as a witty character with a great sense of humour. She raised four children, likes to socialize and takes pride in how she presents herself. Spinney enjoys many recreational activities in her continuing care home including gardening, crafting and listening to musical performances. Improving how she can communicate has enhanced her quality of life.

May is speech and hearing month. It is never too late to improve how we communicate with our loved ones.

Try the following tips:

- Reduce the number of distractions.
- Make eye contact. Use gentle touch to get attention.



- Keep information short and to the point.
- Say important things twice to help the person stay focused.
- Be patient. Give the person extra time to answer.
- Give the person choices instead of asking open-ended questions (e.g., “Would you like a sandwich or soup?” instead of “What do you want for lunch?”).
- Write reminders and steps on how to do things
- Use calendars and memory books to help the person to remember and to talk about memories
- Leave a diary for visitors to write notes about their visits.