



# Ministering to the Cognitively Impaired

LifeCare Memos® - Messages of Compassion

Someone wisely said, “One cannot *not communicate*.” At first glance this may seem difficult to accept until we understand that communication is more than mere content, it is non-verbal as well as verbal. In fact, 93% of all communication is non-verbal.

## Communication Challenge

Communication becomes even more difficult when a loved one is suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Although there are a number of stages, communication is usually negatively impacted to varying degrees in each stage. How do we meet the challenge?

**First, understand that your desire to communicate is your greatest asset.**

Your presence, not just your words, speaks to the heart of your loved one. They may not cognitively remember you, but their heart remembers.

I will never forget my mother’s loneliness as she faced cancer. She said that people stayed away from her because they didn’t know what to say. It is difficult to see our loved ones deteriorate; however, that is not the time to isolate them or yourself. When communication seems one-sided, it becomes frustrating. The temptation is to visit them less frequently. However, that only compounds the isolation issue and causes further loneliness.

One goal of communication ought to be emotional connectedness. Sometimes this occurs without words. The poem, “Heart Memories”, reminds us that one can forget details about you but still remember you with their heart.

*“I remember you with my heart. My mind won’t say your name. I can’t recall where I knew you; Who you were or who I was. There’s something wrong with my memory, but I do know you and I love you. Today I am happy you have come. When you leave my mind will not remember that you were here, but my heart remembers!”*

It is important to realize that although you may not connect intellectually or cognitively, you may still connect emotionally and relationally.

**Second, your knowledge of your love one's past interests, hobbies, likes and dislikes may be an appropriate springboard for a "window of opportunity."**

These "windows" are spontaneous but are often triggered by past memories or experiences. For example, by incorporating pictures of farming equipment, your father or brother may flash back to a time of planting or harvesting. Be sure to attempt to elicit, where possible, any emotions they experienced which help them enjoy this "window" to the fullest.

Find copies of old songs, religious or secular, that you know your loved one enjoyed and bring recordings when available. A brief segment of a Lawrence Welk program may provide an opportunity for you to sing together the old familiar words.

The key is *familiar*. Music has an effect on memory and often triggers that which we dismiss as unretrievable. Music is the key that retrieves, and often a person is able to recite the music word perfect, even when they may have trouble remembering names. Hymns are appropriate as they renew our faith experiences.

**Third, do not overlook the power of compassionate, therapeutic touch.**

Compassionate touch can be beneficial in physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual ways. In fact, *"The use of touch and physical closeness may be the most important way to communicate to acutely ill persons that they are important as human beings"* (Ashley Montague).

Physiologically tender rhythmic touch can decrease muscle contractions, increase circulation and lower heart rate and blood pressure. These changes may contribute to a lessening of anxiety and an increase in relaxation.

Compassionate touch can also quiet the agitated mind and strengthen the spirit. *"Touch deprivation is a largely ignored yet a major cause of depression among elderly in our society"* (Dawn Nelson). As your loved one is able to relax, they are free to remember and to enjoy your presence.

### ***Listen with Your Heart***

*"My mind will not remember that you were here. But my heart remembers, remembers the feeling of friendship and love returned. Remembers that I am less lonely and happier today, because of the feeling, because you have come. Please don't forget me: and please don't stay away because of the way my mind acts. I can still love you, I can still feel you. I can remember you with my heart. And a heart memory is maybe the most important memory of all."* (Author Unknown)

## ***God's Word***

**GOD** encourages us not to forget or overlook the needs of the aged.

*“And now in my old age, don’t set me aside. Don’t abandon me when my strength is failing”* (Psalms 71:8)

*“Pure and lasting religion in the sight of **GOD** means that we care for orphans and widows in their troubles”* (James 1:27).

## ***Practical Suggestions***

Communication may be limited and at times may seem impossible. However, do not remain silent. You are not alone if you struggle with relating. These practical suggestions will assist you with the task of communication:

- 1) **Recognize** your presence is a gift.
- 2) **Remember**, communication is not just words, it is non-verbal as well as verbal.
- 3) **Reconnect** with your loved one by utilizing the past as a bridge to the present.
- 4) **Rejuvenate** their memories through music—sing, play music from their era, sing hymns.
- 5) **Remember**, compassionate, therapeutic touch can lessen anxiety and allow your loved one to relax and enjoy the moment with you.
- 6) **Renew** your relationship by listening “with your heart.”

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## ***LifeCare Memos***<sup>®</sup>

When experiencing the stresses of life, people need support. The Psalmist needed that support and found it when he turned to God. He said, *“Look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one **cares for my life**. I cry to you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living’”* (Psalm 142:4-5).

***LifeCare Memos*** are designed as messages of compassion that integrate biblical guidelines for emotional and spiritual well-being. Topics focus on various life-care issues and address them from the perspective of Scripture.