

Tips for Improving Communication with Elderly Loved Ones

1. Adapt your communication style, taking into consideration the effects of life changes, chronic illness, and dementia for your loved one.
 - ◆ Speak clearly and distinctly, at eye level.
 - ◆ Choose a vocabulary appropriate to the ability of your loved one
 - ◆ Be patient when waiting for responses, and be willing to restate questions and answers.
 - ◆ Be sensitive and consider your demeanor, tone, and facial expressions as you communicate.
2. Respect who your loved one is as an image-bearer of Jesus Christ. Regard their background, values, knowledge, and expertise.
3. Create a comfortable and relaxed mood for interaction. Don't place performance expectations on your loved one.
4. For those with memory loss, gently guess and use context clues from circumstances and body language to help interpret your loved one's intent. It doesn't matter if they communicate precisely or clearly. Your gentle, loving acceptance is your greatest gift.
5. As cognitive abilities diminish, place greater emphasis upon providing information, and avoid asking questions that require your loved one to provide information.
6. Provide links to your loved one's past:
 - ◆ Scrapbooks
 - ◆ Photo albums
 - ◆ Tapes, CD's
7. As much as possible encourage your loved one to engage in activities, and participate with them:
 - ◆ Programs
 - ◆ Reading books and magazines
 - ◆ Walks
 - ◆ Storytelling, singing
 - ◆ Manicures
 - ◆ Puzzles and games
8. Create a visitors' journal, tape, or photo album for your loved one to re-play, re-read, or look through to remind them who was there to visit them. The journal also provides a wonderful written record for family members who come to visit or to preserve after your loved one's death.
9. Don't be afraid to involve children visits, but remember that over-stimulation can be taxing for older people. Whenever possible, bring one or two children at a time, and keep the visits brief.
10. Don't forget that physical touch is important. Give hugs, brush hair, hold hands, or offer to give a shoulder rub or a manicure.
11. Ask questions about the stories of your loved one's past, if they're able to remember. Be sure to ask how they felt about the memories they recall.
12. Learn to be comfortable with silences.

Suggestions for Creating Shared Stories with Your Loved Ones

The following topic list will help you evoke conversation or memories with your loved ones.

Celebrations: Tell who was there and why the day was special (horrible, embarrassing, heartbreaking, etc.).

- Birthday
- Christmas
- Their graduation
- The graduation of someone special to them
- Their wedding
- The wedding of someone special to them
- Anniversary
- Births

Famous Firsts: Tell who was there and the details of the day.

- Their first date
- Their first job
- Their first car/bicycle/motorcycle
- Their first kiss
- Their first boyfriend or girlfriend
- Their first television
- Their first telephone

Favorites: Tell what circumstances and details made these things your favorites.

- A favorite place to go on a date when you were young
- A favorite family vacation as a child
- A favorite vacation they took their own children on
- Their favorite aunt, uncle, or special relative
- Their favorite memory of a grandmother or grandfather
- Their favorite memory of their father or mother
- Their favorite teacher
- A favorite recipe
- A favorite food that their mother or grandmother cooked or baked

Life Passages: Tell how these experiences or people changed your life.

- War experiences
- The accomplishment they feel the most proud of
- Their first experience with death
- Their wedding day
- The person they'd most like to see again
- Their most significant faith experience