



A FAMILY  
RESOURCE

# Having a Conversation with the Memory Impaired

*These 6 simple steps will help you enhance and enjoy your visit with your loved one with dementia.*



## INTRODUCTION

*In all cases of dementia, the ability to remember becomes increasingly impaired, making it difficult to communicate.*

*As those memory problems increase, it becomes the responsibility of the visiting family or caregiver to manage and guide the conversation.*

**How can you enhance communication with someone with memory issues or dementia? Find out how with these 6 simple steps.**

### **Step 1: Set the stage**

Dementia is a set of symptoms caused by diseases such as Alzheimer's, Cardiovascular disease, Lewy Body, etc., which also make focusing attention and processing sight and sound more challenging.

With memory impairment, attention drifts from one stimulus to another. Sounds merge into incomprehensible noise. So, before you initiate any conversation, pick a quiet place free without visual or auditory distractions.

### Step 2. Start the conversation with a simple observation

Beginning a new conversation with something easy for a memory impaired person to process gets the visit off to a great start. Compliments such as “My, don’t you look pretty today,” are easily understood, helps the resident become more receptive, and makes further conversation more likely.

### Step 3. Don’t start the conversation with a question

Even a simple opening like “How are you?” can put pressure on a person with dementia to, not only understand your question, but compose words for a response.

This pressure can cause stress and immediately activate the fight or flight response, making subsequent conversation more difficult.

If you must ask a question, wait until your initial contact has been successful and remember to make the question as simple to answer as possible.

Don’t ask a question they may not be able to answer such as “Do you remember who I am?” Instead, look for any signs of recognition in the way they respond to you.

### Step 4. Try to identify where and when the person currently thinks they are before going further

Often, a person with memory issues is disoriented in time and place. They may be waiting for their parents or expecting to see their long-ago grown children. Talking about your reality can cause instant confusion and even anxiety. They may not remember who you are. They may even mistake you for someone else. To help orient them, make a simple statement such as “I came to visit”.

### Step 5. Once they think they recognize you, begin a conversation

If they recognize you as the wrong person, don’t correct them, just go with the flow. Often, they’ll get reoriented as they talk, but correcting them early in the conversation can create stress, making further conversation — and your visit — more difficult.

If they do recognize you, think about what they would like to talk about and guide the conversation in that direction. Once they’re comfortable, redirect the conversation the way you want it to go.

### Step 6. If you run into difficulty, take a break and redirect

Sometimes things happen outside your control that can disrupt your conversation. A loud noise might cause the person with dementia to become scared or angry. If this happens, don’t try to force the person right back into the conversation. Instead, offer them a break and reintroduce the subject. You might have to begin the conversation all over again because they’ll have already forgotten it. Don’t get discouraged. In dementia care, repetition is often key to communication success.

Visiting a resident with memory loss often seems like a thankless task. But it is far from thankless. While your loved one may no longer be able to show affection or even remember your visit, just know that for a short period of their confusing life, they found solace and comfort in your visit.



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**Additional resources can be found on our website,  
[www.avilainstitute.org/family-resources](http://www.avilainstitute.org/family-resources).**

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