Caring Conversations
How to Communicate with Those Who Have Memory Loss

You can’t control memory loss, only your reaction to it. Reminding people who have memory loss that their memory is impaired is rarely kind. When communicating with persons with memory loss, remember, their reactions are normal based on what they believe is happening. Memory loss requires family caregivers to adopt a new way of talking.

Be kind...don’t remind.

Reasoning

DON’T: Argue

Why didn’t you tell me I had a dentist appointment today?

(Argue) I did! I reminded you this morning!

DO: Be patient, and go with the flow and distract

I understand you are upset about missing your appointment.

(Reassure) I’ll make sure to reschedule.

(Distract) Let’s read the newspaper together.

Reminding

DON’T: Remind them that they forget

I wonder how my mom is doing. I haven’t spoken to her in a while and I miss her.

(Reassure) You really miss your mom don’t you?

(Distract) Maybe we can give her a call after our afternoon walk.

DO: Reassure and distract

Your mom passed away 10 years ago! You were at her funeral. Don’t you remember?

100% Forgiveness

DON’T: Take it personally

Who are you? Where’s my husband?

(take it personally) What do you mean-where’s your husband? I am your husband!

DO: Distract them to a different subject

(Reassure) Go with the flow, I’ll be here for dinner.

(distract) How about some tea and cookies? Would you like chocolate chip or oatmeal?
Phrasing your message

**DON’T:** Use the word “but”

- I don’t want to wear this sweater vest.
- I hate it!

**DO:** Use “however” and “nevertheless”

- I know you hate this sweater vest, but it’s cold today so you better keep it on!

*Example*

I don’t want to wear this sweater vest. I hate it!  
(use “but”) I know you hate this sweater vest, but it’s cold today so you better keep it on!

I’m sorry. I forgot that this sweater vest isn’t your favorite, (smile) however, it’s cold today and I don’t want you to get sick.

The “Don’ts” and “Do’s” of caring conversation:

**FORGIVING**

- Don’t take things personally
- Don’t question their memory
- Don’t blame them
- Forgive any negative reactions
- Accept the blame (even when it isn’t your fault)
- Impart 100% forgiveness instead of engaging in confrontation

**REMININDING**

- Don’t remind them that they forget
- Don’t test their memory
- Don’t contradict or correct
- Provide brief explanations
- Repeat instructions or sentences in exactly the same way (don’t re-word)
- Reminisce

**BEING PATIENT**

- Don’t rush them
- Don’t argue
- Don’t correct
- Avoid insistence, try again later
- To avoid confrontations, you may choose to leave the room
- Give them time to comprehend what you are asking/saying
- Be patient, cheerful and reassuring

**REASONING**

- Don’t reason
- Don’t try to convince them
- Don’t insist
- Simply agree with them
- Divert attention by introducing a different subject
- Divert attention with a new activity

**REDUCING ANXIETY**

- Don’t ask open-ended questions (e.g. What do you want for lunch?)
- Avoid distress
- Acknowledge their feelings
- Present them with easy, straightforward options to choose from (e.g. Do you want ham or turkey for your sandwich?)
- Constantly reassure them

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Next Steps: If you need suggestions on how to handle challenging situations, call Alzheimer’s Orange County at 844-HELP-ALZ (844-435-7259), or visit our website at www.alzoc.org for more information or to register for our Caring Conversations: A New Way of Talking class.