Helping Older Parents Cheatsheet
Connecting & Communication in Memory Loss

Created by Leslie Kernisan MD, BetterHealthWhileAging.net, for Helping Older Parents with Early Memory Loss

If your parent is having problems with memory or thinking, you’ll want to use better ways to communicate with them, and to respond to what they say and do.

These techniques will help reduce conflict and improve connection.

This cheatsheet has two main parts:

- **Part 1:** Key points covered in the Connecting module of the Helping Older Parents with Early Memory Loss Course.
- **Part 2:** Communication tips for discussing an issue or concerns (adapted from the communication cheatsheet for the book *When Your Aging Parent Needs Help: A geriatrician’s step-by-step guide to memory loss, resistance, safety worries and more*).

Need more cheatsheets and guidance on helping a parent with memory loss?

Learn more here: Betterhealthwhileaging.net/education-and-support/helping-older-parents-with-memory-loss
Part 1: Connecting with your older parent with memory loss

In this part:
- Fundamental principles to remember
- What to STOP saying
- Responding to repetition
- Responding when they deny something
- Responding to false accusations
- Responding to resistance

Fundamental principles to remember

Empathy rather than explanations:
- Meet the person where they are
- Help them feel better about themselves & you
- Reason why, rather than reasoning with
- Your goal should be:
  - Validation
  - Reassurance
  - Understanding THEM: how they see a situation and how they feel about it (NOT getting them to understand you)
- Avoid trying to correct their reality or beliefs
- Do NOT persist in trying to get them to understand
  - Focus on helping them feel understood, or at least: accepted and loved
- It’s not always necessary to tell the whole truth
  - And it is sometimes ok to fudge things or even use a “fiblet”

What to STOP saying

These responses trigger embarrassment, shame, or defensiveness in your older parent:
- “Don’t you remember?”
- “Why did you do that?”
- “But that’s not true”
- “You’ve already asked that”
- “We just talked about that”
- “You need to accept/remember/understand that...”
- “Do you remember that...”
- “I can’t believe you did/didn’t do that”
Responding to repetition
When they repeat a statement or question:

- Why
  - Often a persisting trigger, like seeing someone or something
  - They forget they already responded
  - Sometimes due to anxiety, an unmet need, or boredom
- Try
  - Give an answer, calmly and briefly, without pointing out they are repeating themselves
  - Transition their attention to something else
  - Posting schedules or reminders sometimes helps

Responding when they deny something
When they say they didn’t do something (e.g. taking medication incorrectly, damaging the car, putting an object in a strange place):

- Why
  - They probably have forgotten what they previously did or said
- Try
  - Avoid insisting that they did do it
  - Move on to a positive approach to resolving the issue without embarrassing them
  - Consider acknowledging that someone else might have done it and then redirect the conversation away from what your parent did or didn’t do

Responding to false accusations
When your parent is accusing you – or someone else – of something:

- Why
  - They have often misplaced something
  - Underlying anxiety or confusion may have led them to create a story
  - Some people just get paranoid delusions with dementia
- Try
  - Avoid trying to explain “the truth”
  - Acknowledge their concern and provide reassurance
    - Be careful about agreeing or endorsing the delusion
  - Let them know of a next step you plan to take
  - Consider addressing an underlying emotion
  - Redirect their attention to something else
Responding to resistance

It is often frustrating when an aging parent resists help. Acknowledge the challenge and then try to use this as an opportunity to connect and learn more about what matters to your parent. This connection and what you learn will be invaluable later when you attempt to step-in.

The 4-step connecting approach you can use:

• Consider how cognitive impairment is playing into this.
• Make sure you’ve heard & validated your parent’s feelings.
• Probe to learn more about their fears, desires, goals, and priorities.
• Distinguish what YOU need from what THEY need.

Tips

• Useful phrases:
  – “Hm, sounds like you don’t like that idea.”
  – “Tell me more”
  – “What I’m hearing from you is that it’s really important that…”

• For exploring desires:
  – “Tell me more about what you like about ____”

• For exploring fears:
  – Fears will probably be hard for your parent to describe directly
  – Try listening to what they are saying, & then venturing an interpretation: “It sounds like you’re worried that _____. Does that sound right?”

• Be careful about asking “Why”:
  – It makes people defensive & usually they’ll have trouble coming up with a good answer
Part 2: Communication when discussing a concern or issue

In this part:

- 12 basic tips for discussing a concern or issue
- Sample conversation starters for opening a conversation about concerns
- Useful phrases that can keep the talk going – and what to NOT say
- Extra advice for talking to a parent with memory problems

12 basic tips for discussing a concern or issue

Key: Start in a natural, conversational way:
Open with broad or general questions rather than launching into your concerns. Consider starting with something very generic, like “How are you feeling?” or “How’s the house?” as a way to test the waters on their current mood and openness to talking more. Then, to explore an issue, bring up one specific observation (“I noticed that [insert incident or observation] happened the other day”) and invite your parent to comment on it and tell you more.

Know that it’s likely to take more than one conversation:
As awkward and painful as these talks can be for some, it’s rare that you get a full understanding of your parent’s perspective in one swoop. It’s often easier on both sides to revisit the topic several times.

Aim for a 1:1:
Even if you’re collaborating with another sibling or your partner, you might have more success talking solo with your parent/s. See if you can agree on a spokesperson ahead of time. Some parents are receptive to having such conversations in a group, but for others it can feel like “ganging up.” If your parent starts out on the defensive, it’s less likely to be a constructive conversation.

Pick the right setting and time:
Make sure you’re not competing with the TV, radio, or a roomful of relatives. Being outside or enjoying a treat together can help you both relax. Choose a time when your parent is most likely to feel rested and alert; many older adults have more energy and focus in the morning. And while a holiday visit might seem convenient, it can put a damper on a happy time, so your parent might not be responsive.

Give it time:
Many older adults take a while to dive into a deeper conversation, especially if they’re having trouble with vision, hearing, or mobility. In fact, normal cognitive aging by itself means that older adults need more time to weigh complex issues, especially those that trigger negative emotions. Avoid diving in with, “Mom, we need to talk about your living situation!” You might ease in with small talk about the weather or your dog first. As you ask questions, allow plenty of space for answers; don’t be in a rush to fill pauses or silences with chatter.
Assume nothing:
This isn’t about who’s right and who’s wrong. It’s about exploring what your parent feels and values, how he or she sees things. Best to go into this conversation expecting you won’t see things exactly the same way, because most parents and adult children don’t. Conflicts and trade-offs are likely. Or what you hear may not be logical or wise.

Ask questions instead of making statements:
Let this be your rule of thumb during your conversation, no matter what you’re tempted to say. Listening is more important than telling.

Watch blame-loaded words:
Stick to “I” statements (“I’m wondering/I’m curious/I’ve noticed”) over “you” comments (“You always/you keep/your problem is…”). Try to stay away from generalizations like always, never, everything, nothing.

Don’t get undermined by your own body language:
Believe it or not, studies show that more of a message gets communicated through nonverbal ways than through words, and what you’re not saying can undermine you. Examples of cues to avoid: frowning, sighing, tense shoulders, lack of eye contact, standing over someone seated, pointing fingers, crossing your arms in front of you (which signals confrontation and not being open).

Be a good listener:
You can reinforce the sense of being heard and respected by mirroring back or paraphrasing what your parent is saying: “So you wish you could stay in this house forever.” “You sound worried about your memory.” Or even, “I’m hearing you say that you don’t think anything is wrong with you.” “So you don’t want to talk about this right now?” Avoid interrupting.

Put your own feelings aside:
Try not to react with frustration or exasperation. Above all, try not to take resistance or rejection personally. Remember, the emotional brain is ruling in these kinds of talks, so you might have to make extra effort to stay neutral.

Don’t try to solve anything yet:
You might feel like once you’ve dived into a subject with your parent/s that you need to take it to the conclusion: a solution. Instead, avoid getting caught up in moving toward, or even talking about, how to fix things at this point. It’s better to build rapport and collect information.
Sample conversation starters for opening a conversation about concerns

- “I’ve noticed that you sometimes [insert an observation, like: have trouble taking all these pills]. Can we talk about it? I was wondering if you had noticed any changes in how you’re doing and what you thought of them.”

- “I see that [insert an observation, like you almost fell on those old steps]. Is that happening a lot?”

- “Tell me the best and worst things about [insert an expressed or observed problem, like: keeping up with all these bills]. Maybe we can figure out how to make it better.”

- “You seem [insert an emotional state, like: frustrated/sad/worried/preoccupied] ... so I’ve been a little worried. What are your thoughts about [insert a possible issue, like: how you keep forgetting where you parked the car?]” (Or, “What did your doctor have to say about that?”)

- “Can I help you with that?” [in response to a topic that’s been complained about, like: a new medication]

- “I’ve been thinking about where I’ll live when I retire and was wondering what you think about [insert a concern you’re seeing in your parent/s that you can personalize, like: whether it’s a good idea to stay in our two-story house or not].”

- “You know I really care about you — I’d like to make sure I understand more about what you’ve been feeling about [insert observation about an issue, like: not being able to drive at night anymore].”

- “You know I want what’s best for you and makes you happiest. That’s why I’m curious what you would like to see happen if [insert a hypothetical, like: you couldn’t climb the stairs to this house or your room anymore].”

- “How are you feeling about [insert a parallel situation from the news or a friend, like: Mrs. Smith moving away]? Would you ever want to do that?”

Useful phrases that can keep the talk going, so you find out more

- “Hmmm, tell me more.” (Both neutral and encouraging, this is one of the most useful responses you can offer — especially if they’ve just said something that sounds a bit nutty.)
• “Can you say more about that?”

• “What’s the most important part of that for you?”

• “What else is on your mind?”

• “Would you like me to help you get some more information about that?”

• “What if things got worse; what would you like to see happen?”

• “Anything else?”

What NOT to say when discussing concerns
Avoid saying things that could be interpreted as telling them how they should or shouldn’t feel, or what they should or shouldn’t do:

• “Why don’t you...”

• “You need to...”

• “What you really should do is...”

• “What’s taking so long?”

• “I don’t understand why you haven’t...”

• “We need to make a decision about...”

• “The doctor said you should....”

• “That’s exactly why you should....”

• “Like I keep telling you....”

• “You obviously should....”

• “When are you going to....?”

• “Here’s what I’m going to do.”
Extra advice for talking to a parent with memory problems

Avoid arguing about what’s true or real:
Someone with cognitive impairment is losing the ability to see your point of view or even the reality of a situation — and that’s the perfect set-up for lots of disagreements. Knowing this ahead of time can help you sidestep locked horns before it happens.

Forget about insisting you can get them to “understand”:
Insisting on the reasoning and logic behind a particular decision, especially one the parent might not prefer, won’t work. When cognitive issues are present, brain functions that support logic, judgment, and rationality are affected. No matter how hard you try, no matter how patient your explanations, your parent/s may become upset, hold a decision against you, or behave in other uncharacteristic ways. Unfortunately, this is a common aspect of living with cognitive impairment that you can’t do anything about. It’s natural to want to explain, and fine to try to a limited extent. But don’t beat yourself up if doing so goes nowhere. And definitely don’t persist with getting them to understand if it’s not working.

Don’t expect a logical flow to your conversations:
Your parent/s may not be able to engage in thoughtful negotiations or follow lines of thinking that make perfect sense to you. Yet your auto-pilot impulse will be to fall back on the same logic and other ways of conversing with your parent/s that you’ve always used. Even if much of the time they seem “normal,” brain changes can interfere with (or prevent) really productive, linear talks. If you find yourself feeling frustrated by your parent’s lack of logic, try to take a deep breath. Then focus on listening to them and accepting where they are at with their thinking, even if it seems to be going in circles or isn’t logical.

Don’t feel compelled to tell the whole truth or nothing but the truth:
When someone has cognitive challenges, it’s okay to hide certain aspects of the truth or leave out certain facts. Really. It’s also often appropriate to tell a “fibtel” — a kind of white lie sometimes called a “therapeutic non-truth” — when doing so will cause them less distress or anxiety. Think of it as suspending your natural preference to be perfectly honest at all times in service of the bigger goal of what’s ultimately in your parent’s best interests. This is different from deceiving someone in order to do them harm. You’re doing so out of empathy and compassion to lessen their stress and improve their situation.

Help the brain’s slowed processor by simplifying:
You might try slowing your rate of speech a bit (not in an exaggerated way, but with more patience than you might be used to). Break big ideas and long sentences into fewer words. Rather than rushing in to fill a silence, give your parent/s time to respond, maybe more time than you’re used to.
When a conversation goes off the rails, try steering to emotions rather than facts:
Instead of trying to correct or convince, play back what they seem to be feeling: “You seem upset about that.” “You sound anxious about how you’ll get around.” When someone feels heard, you can bypass an argument or flat-out resistance. Show empathy now and revisit the topic later.

Remember that your words are just part of communication:
All of us, but especially those with cognitive impairment, actually get more out of the speaker’s body language (frowning face, crossed arms) and tone of voice (impatience, sarcasm, insincerity). It really helps to go out of your way to do things like smile, make eye contact, gently touch a shoulder as you talk, and use a reassuring or upbeat tone.

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