



Duke Dementia Family Support Program

Caregiver Connections

An Educational Webinar Series with the Experts

The presentation will begin shortly.

dukefamilysupport.org

919-660-7510

Navigating Communication Challenges as a Care Partner

Cornelia Poer, MSW, LCSW

Duke Dementia Family Support Program

August 6, 2026





Communication

Can make a situation better
or make it much worse

The Rule of Personal Communication



Verbal

message pertaining to feelings and attitudes conveyed through spoken word.



Tone of voice

The way that the words are said.



Body language

It comprises of messages conveyed through facial expression and so on.

***“I speak French;
you speak Spanish;
and we live in an English-
speaking country.”***

HELLO

HOLA

ADIOS

BONJOUR

GUTEN
TAG

SALUT

CIAO

Hi

OLÀ

Communication
gradually
changes for

- person living with dementia
- care partner

Affecting both

- the ability to express oneself
- the ability to understand

Communication can be
especially challenging
because each person
still looks like themselves
and sounds like themselves
but they are not themselves.



Communication Challenges

Communication challenges are **unique** to each individual living with dementia and may include:

- Repeating
- Trouble finding words
- Using incorrect words
- Words that are not logically organized
- Losing train of thought
- Talking less



Communication Challenges

For both the person living with dementia and their care partners, communication can be affected by:

- Emotional ups and downs
- Change in roles
- Response to changes





Communication Strategies



**Make
eye contact**



**Remove
background noise**



**Use gentle touch
if appropriate**



**Body
language**

Environment

- Set a positive mood
- Quiet place away from distractions as needed

Hearing Concerns:

- Use hearing aids or amplifiers
- Face the person when talking
- Use lower tone of voice
- Avoid shouting

Adult with adult emotions



Patient, calm and reassuring approach



Encouraging tone of voice



Speak slowly as needed



Avoid slang/metaphors



Unless it is a safety issue, avoid correcting, criticizing and arguing

Communication Considerations

- Pay attention; convey interest; make eye contact
- Be aware of body language, facial expressions, and gestures
- Use humor as appropriate
- Share experiences
- Breakdown instructions into steps as needed
- Keep in mind personalities and idiosyncrasies

Communication Considerations

1

Less is more; limit details

- Outline not paragraph

2

Allow time to process information

- Silence is golden

3

Distraction and redirection

- “Not to change the subject but....”
- “First, perhaps we can _____”

4

Reassurance

- Focus on the feelings, not the facts
- “I’m not sure. Let me check.”
- “I’m sorry you feel that way.”



Communication Considerations

Team approach because the outcome matters to everyone

“We” instead of “You”

Reframe as gratitude

“It really helps me”

“I appreciate you
—”

Communication Considerations

Repeating

- Provide the same information/answer; prompts or gestures as needed

Trouble finding words

- Person living with dementia preference for guessing/filling-in words

Using incorrect words

- Avoid correcting, criticizing or arguing
- Acknowledge if you do not understand



Communication Considerations

Illogical words or organization

- Take a moment; redirect as needed

Losing train of thought

- Redirect; “Put it in the Incubator then shout it out when it comes back to you.”

Talking less

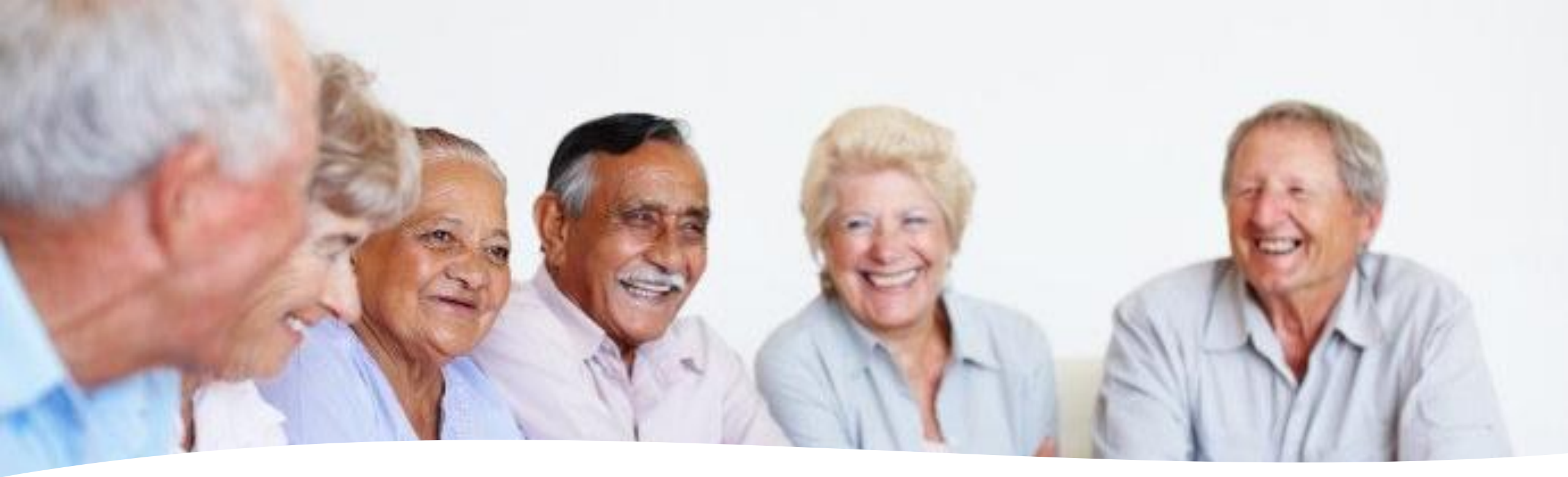
- Involve in conversations; physical contact, such as pat on the back, as appropriate

Communication Considerations

Regarding respite, companions, and adult day programs

- Avoid quizzing
- Meet the person living with dementia where they are





Communication Considerations

Remember, you will make mistakes.
Forgive and forget.

Keep your sense of humor.

Find ways to debrief and decompress



Contact Information

Duke Dementia Family Support
Program

Main Number: 919-660-7510

dukefamilysupport.org

Cornelia Poer, MSW, LCSW

919-681-8280

cornelia.poer@duke.edu



Duke Dementia Family Support Program

Caregiver Connections

An Educational Webinar Series with the Experts

Thank you for joining us today!

dukefamilysupport.org

919-660-7510