

Aging & Communications: *Engaging Older People*

Module #4 Reference Guide

OBJECTIVES

1. To identify communication styles that promote dignity and respect.
2. To discuss effective communication techniques.
3. To select three techniques to use when communicating with older people.

BACKGROUND

Information and communication are not the same. Information is “*What*” we share, and communication is “*How*” we share it. When interacting with older people, it is important to be sensitive to how they prefer to communicate, learn and use information. Remember, the way you communicate and learn may NOT be the same as people from a different generation.

Communication involves sending, receiving, understanding and utilizing information. Attitudes, feelings and behaviors can cause breakdowns in communication between people of different generations. Miscommunication can cause people to respond or react negatively. Additionally, older people are sometimes left out of conversations, even when the issues impact them.

***“It is downright humiliating when the health care provider says to my daughter – “And what are “WE” here for today?” – ASK ME!
You obviously see me sitting here.” – Emma, age 81***

Regardless of the situation, a person may be at risk when information is not communicated well or fully understood.

“Just because you know what you’re talking about doesn’t mean that I do. Start with basic explanations, tell me my options and give me time to figure out what’s going on and ask questions. Help me and my family make choices that are best for me but don’t tell me what to do.” – Ernestine, age 73

Many factors can lead to breakdowns in communication. Be aware of the following age-related issues:

- hearing impairment;
- declining sight or vision;
- declining memory and,
- inability to read or understand.

Other issues include:

- the type of information being shared,
- understanding of an issue or topic,
- the environment, and
- personal style, such as use of body language, tone of voice, choice of words, speaking pace and more.

How do YOU interact with older people? Do you tend to “Talk WITH” and involve older people or “Talk TO” them? Many younger people talk TO them, telling older people things and not really caring what they have to say. Listening is a major part of communication.

Three elements of effective communication are:

1. **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.** To acknowledge is *“to take notice of or reply to.”* Sadly, many older people are not acknowledged when they need to be. Instead, they are overlooked, avoided and talked down to.
2. **PARTICIPATION.** To participate is *“to have a part or share in.”* In addition to the factors listed above, we need to be aware of issues that could affect a person’s ability to participate in a conversation. Language and cultural backgrounds can present challenges. Imagine if your primary language doesn’t match that of the person you are talking with and how disconnected you might feel.
3. **ENGAGEMENT.** To engage is *“to interest or involve.”* We need to speak in a way that encourages involvement and engages the older person in conversation. Be aware of your tone and choose your words carefully. If a person feels threatened, embarrassed or offended, they may shut down.

“Skip the comments like “Hi Sweetie”. You don’t know me so let’s not get too friendly. If you see that I have gray hair and wrinkles don’t treat me like I am a child. I am a capable adult who is filled with wisdom and has been around the block more times than you.” – Shirley, age 76

Older people are individuals with their own unique personalities. Some are quiet and easygoing, while others are loud and assertive. Some listen and nod; others express concerns and ask a lot of questions. As a result, do not expect all older people to act or respond the same way.

People also have different learning styles. Many older people are visual learners, meaning they need to see or read something to understand and utilize it. Some are auditory learners,

meaning they learn by listening or hearing. Others are kinesthetic learners meaning they prefer hands-on learning where they are taking notes or being shown how to do something. The following sums up the important information in this module:

SAGE ADVICE

S is for **SIMPLIFY**. Instead of technical or medical terms, use simple words that older people are likely to be familiar with and understand.

A is for **ASSURE**. Don't assume all older people are deaf, dumb or blind. Assure them they matter by communicating with kindness and involving them in the conversation.

G is for **GIVE information**. Help older people make informed decisions by sharing information in the way they prefer. Writing or demonstrating something can be helpful.

E is for **EASE into it**. Avoid sharing too much, too quick. Unfamiliar situations can be overwhelming, so slow down and allow people time to process the information.

A is for **ACKNOWLEDGE**. Instead of overlooking older people, recognize, engage and listen to them.

D is for **DISCOVERY**. Just because someone nods their head doesn't mean they understand you. Ask older people questions to see if they truly comprehend.

V is for **VALUE**. Avoid using overly friendly terms and baby talk. Instead, respect older people by using their proper name such as Mr. Smith.

I is for **INDIVIDUALIZE**. Acknowledge language barriers and be sensitive to one's values, cultural beliefs and changes associated with natural aging.

C is for **COMMUNICATE**. Avoid telling people what to do. Instead, focus on what is most important for them to know and consider. Make sure they understand what is required of them.

E is for **EMPATHIZE**: Try to understand a situation from the older person's perspective. Watch for feedback and cues to guide communication and information sharing. Be sensitive to the situation, potential challenges and needs.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

Consider the following as you interact with older people:

1. Older people need and are entitled to be recognized when matters involve them. Even if a person has dementia or memory loss, direct your comments and attention to him or her.
2. You can interact more effectively by understanding how aging changes can impact communication.
3. We must communicate respectfully with older people and provide the right information the right way to help them make informed decisions.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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