



## When Words Fail...

Alzheimer's disease (AD) slowly robs the ability to use language. Language is a learned skill: first we learn to understand our parents; then to speak with them; later to read; and then to write. With advancing AD/dementia most people lose those abilities in the reverse order of that learned.

The initial change you are likely to notice is changes in letter writing, followed by changes in reading comprehension. The person can read all of the words on the page aloud but is unable to describe what they have read. They are likely to tell you, "I wasn't paying attention." In time you'll note the person begins substituting the wrong word or have problems with naming familiar objects. If the person spoke another language before English they may return to that language but not proficiently.

At the same time word-finding becomes difficult, people with dementia gradually lose the ability to understand spoken words. Each year the person has dementia, more words are lost from conversation. For example, take the sentence "I went to the grocery store and bought milk." In early dementia the person might hear "I went to the \*\*\*\* store and bought \*\*\*\*." You might think the person is not listening and speak louder, but the person can hear you. He/she does not understand the words. In moderate disease, when the person needs directions to bathe, the sentence might be understood as "\*\*\*\* store and bought \*\*\*." In advanced dementia, when the person stops walking the sentence might sound like "I went \*\*\*\*\*." As the person's ability to understand the words leaves, the "noise" of the conversation stays, adding to the problem, confusion and sometimes frustration.

Once the person has lost language, how can we communicate? A few tips:

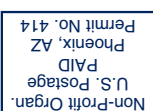
- Remember that while the brain is damaged the person is still "in there." Treat them like they understand you and explain what you are doing at all times.
- Make sure the room is quiet and distractions are eliminated. Sit (if the person is seated) or stand near the person, making direct eye contact. Reinforce the connection with gentle touch. Don't try to communicate when the person is tired.
- Speak in very simple sentences and allow at least 10-20 seconds for the person to respond. If you repeat the sentence or question, repeat it exactly.

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## Additional Ways to Communicate:

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- Hold hands
- Give a hand/foot massage
- Listen to music together
- Sing a favorite song
- Watch a familiar and enjoyable short program on TV
- Laugh at a silly joke
- Enjoy a favorite treat
- Say a familiar prayer
- Hold a favorite object (such as a blanket, prayer shawl, book)
- Look at a picture book that represents a favorite topic
- Read a short story
- Take a short walk
- Enjoy a beautiful sunset
- Go through old photos
- Enjoy the smell of...  
Coffee, roses, baked bread, cookies
- Visit a pet store
- Obtain "read along" stories
  - ◆ The Sunshine on My Face
  - ◆ Wishing on a Star
  - ◆ Happy New Year to You



*(When Words Fail Continued)*

- Ask more yes-no questions but if the person says “no” don’t try to convince, coerce or reason.
- When the person speaks, look for words that make sense and repeat them. Use gestures to help the person understand. Pointing to objects may help.
- Finally, listen with your heart. Watch for responses as slight as a blink, hand motion, or change of facial expression. Listen carefully to any verbal output for meaning. Spontaneous vocalizations, such as yelling “Help me!” or “Mommy” indicate unmet needs such as pain. Look at the emotion and intensity and duration of the vocalization.

People with dementia do communicate with us to the end, if we watch and listen carefully. With practice you will intuitively know what your loved one is trying to express. And your gentle touch and kind words are likely received by the person letting him/her know that he/she is loved.

## Ask The Expert

*Helle Brand, Physician Assistant*



Dear Helle:

My dad suffers from advanced dementia. My family insists he doesn’t know anything and “is just a vegetable.” They think I make things up when I talk about his likes and dislikes. His primary doctor agrees with them but he only spends 5 minutes with dad asking questions. I am the one who spends time with him. There are times when he speaks with me. Do you think my dad knows or understands anything?

Signed,  
“Am I crazy?”

Dear Not Crazy:

You are certainly not crazy. Many primary caregivers are able to remain open to new possibilities of communication, even when the person has advanced dementia. Although your dad makes little eye contact and uses language that makes no sense, most people can say a few words or an occasional sentence. Plus your dad probably communicates non-verbally, making faces, spitting food out, pushing things away with his hands, grunting, and so forth. Pleasure can be communicated with bright eyes, a smile, or a sigh of content. If you sing with your dad or use familiar music, you are likely to elicit a smile and even sing along with the chorus, or just tap his foot.

In addition, in advanced dementia we often see moments of clarity, where the clouded mind clears for a few minutes. During these episodes people frequently talk of their feelings.

As a caregiver you have developed a deep personal bond with your dad, far deeper than those who simply visit for briefer periods of time. So, no you are not crazy; you are simply doing your job as the primary caregiver, giving him time to communicate and accepting what he is willing to tell you. Remain open to the possibilities!

Helle

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## Our Mission

To end Alzheimer’s disease without losing a generation, to set a new standard of care for patients and their families, and to forge a model of collaboration in biomedical research

## Tip on Brain Health

Laughter can be an “invigorating tonic” that brightens mood and releases tension. It is sometimes called “inner jogging” as it can exercise the muscles of your face, shoulders, diaphragm and abdomen, causing your heart rate to rise temporarily. So make sure to laugh daily, read the cartoons in the newspaper, buy a joke book or watch a humorous show!

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## June Beacon Bits

Memory Assistance and Planning Session (MAPS) is a full day workshop for caregivers to gain an understanding of the progression of dementia, treatment options, communication strategies, techniques for coping with challenging behaviors, community resources, and more. Attendees will also have the opportunity to network and share ideas with other caregivers.

**Here’s what caregivers have to say about MAPS:**

“I wish I had this information when I first became a caregiver.”

“I learned how to cope and interact everyday with someone with memory loss.”

“Would recommend this training to friends and family. I will keep the training book on hand for years of use!”

MAPS will be held on Friday, June 25, 2010 from 9:00 am – 3:00 pm at Banner Desert Medical Center in the Rosati Education Center. A \$25 fee covers the cost of materials, instruction and lunch.

Call Veronica Ellis @ (602)839-6850 or email [veronica.ellis@bannerhealth.com](mailto:veronica.ellis@bannerhealth.com) to register.

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