

Communication Skills with Elderly People

Effective communication skills enable caregivers to better understand the needs of the elderly people they serve. They also make it easier for elderly people to comprehend the expressed messages. This in turn enhances the effectiveness of elderly care and fosters a good relationship between caregivers and elderly people.

In communicating with elderly people, caregivers should consider the following factors:

**Verbal and non-verbal
communication skills**

**Environment for
communication**

**Biological and
psychological barriers
to effective communication**



With consideration of the abilities and conditions of individual elderly person, caregivers should flexibly adapt different communication skills.



Verbal communication skills



Use precise and concrete words

Avoid jargons or technical terms



Pause and ask questions as appropriate

Encourage elderly people to express and avoid dominating the conversation



Use simple sentences

Use short phrases and avoid complex sentences



Shift topics flexibly

Make use of the surroundings to change the topic flexibly when elderly people find the conversation uninteresting



Show recognition and appreciation

Recognize and appreciate their contributions to family or society; explore and identify their strengths from their life experiences and wisdom

Environment for communication



Quiet environment

Minimize disturbance and noise



Sufficient lighting

Enhance visual clarity of non-verbal cues



Sufficient time

Facilitate more in-depth communication



Protect privacy

Provide a sense of security, especially when personal and confidential topics are involved

Non-verbal communication skills

Be attentive and engaged in communication

Face each other, maintain eye contact and listen attentively

Show interest

By nodding or giving brief responses, such as 'Yes', 'I see' etc.

Make use of augmentative and alternative communication

Use body language, pictures, written words or real objects to facilitate communication when needed

Be patient

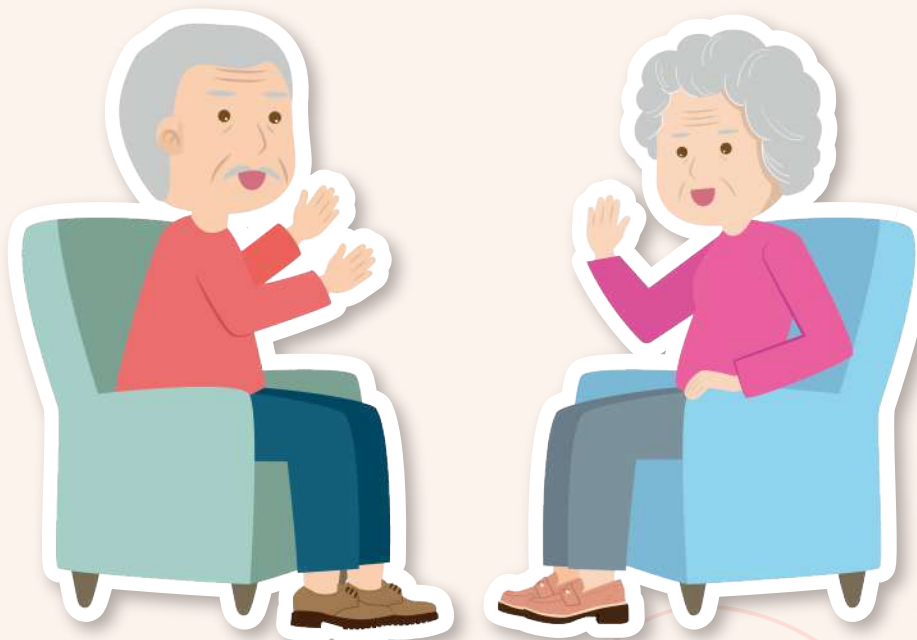
Listen patiently without rushing, and avoid showing absent-mindedness or impatience

Strengthen expression

Speak with a slower pace and a gentle tone of voice, complemented with facial expressions and gestures as appropriate

Show acceptance and respect

Try to understand how the person feels and thinks from his/her perspective. Embrace each other's differences in culture and life experiences. Avoid criticism or forcing your opinions on others



Elderly people's biological barriers to effective communication & handling techniques



Hearing loss

Age-related hearing loss in elderly people typically starts from high frequencies, i.e. high-pitched voice

- Pitch your voice lower and emphasize key words
- Speak in front of them or on their side with better hearing
- Pay attention to your tone when speaking with an amplified voice in order to avoid the misunderstanding that they are being scolded
- Encourage them to seek medical consultation and use hearing aid



Deterioration of vision

Common eye problems such as presbyopia and cataract

- Brief them on the surrounding people and environment
- Encourage them to seek medical consultation and wear prescription glasses



Receptive language problems

E.g. need more time to comprehend the expressed messages

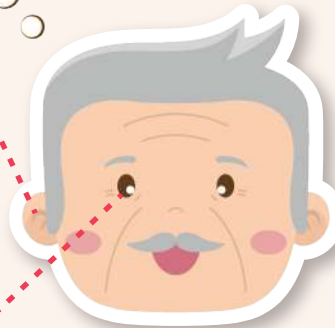
- Allow sufficient time for them to understand and respond
- Use simple and straightforward expressions
- Avoid conveying too much information in one sentence
- Repeat key points to facilitate their comprehension



Expressive language problems

E.g. articulation problem and word-finding problem

- Listen patiently and allow sufficient time for them to express
- Encourage them to express
- Check with them if your understanding is correct



Psychological factors influencing caregivers' communication with elderly people



Prejudice against elderly people

E.g. assuming most of them to be less capable or adaptable to changes, may cause caregivers to resist, avoid, and even refuse to communicate with them



Emotions

Influence receptive and expressive communication, as well as the willingness to communicate, e.g.:

- 😊 Positive emotions enhance willingness to communicate
- 😡 Feeling angry increases the likelihood of misunderstandings
- 😞 Tendency to avoid communication when in low mood



'Elderspeak' communication

Prejudice against elderly people can lead caregivers to talk to them in an infantilizing way. This type of communication is called 'elderspeak' with features including:

Oversimplified diction

Exaggerated praise

Excessively slow or repetitive speech

Exaggerated tone, facial expressions and gestures

Narrow topics which only focus on trivial matters like weather



Negative effects of 'elderspeak'

Elderly people feel disrespected and patronized, and develop negative self-evaluations

They gradually internalize the negative self-evaluations and perform regressive behaviours accordingly

In the long run, their communication abilities diminish while dependency increases

This in turn reinforces caregivers' prejudice against them in a vicious cycle

Tips for improving communication



Evaluate the elderly person's communication abilities

- Be aware of the biological, psychological and environmental factors that may affect communication
- Employ communication skills flexibly based on individual abilities



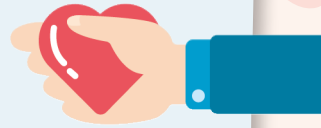
Acquire correct knowledge

- Enhance proper understanding of physical and psychological changes in old age
- Discard prejudice



Be mindful of your communication style with elderly people

- Do not treat them as children
- Do not use 'elderspeak'



Pay attention to each other's emotions

- When the elderly person shows negative emotions, try to respond with empathy: Try to understand from their perspectives, and convey your understanding of their feelings in your own words so as to make them feel understood. For example, you may say

You are feeling
upset/ helpless/ painful
(or other emotions) because...

- When you notice yourself or the elderly person is getting increasingly irritable, agitated or nervous, take a break first. Practise mindful breathing or other relaxation exercise to relax. Return to communicate again after calming down

