

We live in an aging society. By 2030, almost one in four people will be 65+.

Whether it's a person seeking your professional help or an aging loved one, it can be difficult to know how to speak with older adults who face communication difficulties such as hearing loss, aphasia (difficulty understanding and/or using language), speech problems or dementia.

The first step is to recognize you may be influenced by stereotypical beliefs about older adults. Often people know or understand more than they are able to say.



Further Resources

- **Stroke Recovery BC:**
strokerecoverybc.ca
- **Brain Trust Canada:**
braintrustcanada.com
- **Alzheimer Society of Canada:**
alzheimer.ca
- **Parkinson Society of BC:**
parkinson.bc.ca
- **American Geriatrics Society:**
americangeriatrics.org

Talk Spot is an awareness campaign from Speech and Hearing BC: a not-for-profit organization with more than 1200 speech-language pathologists and audiologists in British Columbia. Our vision is optimal communication and swallowing health for all British Columbians. We offer resources and information to members of the public about identifying, living with and treating problems with their speech, language, hearing, voice, swallowing, fluency or social communication.

Visit speechandhearingbc.ca to:

- Receive further information about communicating with older adults.
- Find a speech-language pathologist or audiologist near you.
- Download educational resources for children, parents, caregivers and teachers.

Talk Spot. Find Yours. Use Yours.

Speech and Hearing BC is a registered charity. Speech-language pathologists and audiologists are registered and regulated by the College of Speech and Hearing Health Professionals of BC.



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#TALKSPOT



Communicating with Older Adults

How can you support older adults within and outside of your social circles?

How can you be respectful of people with communication difficulties?

We share tips from audiologists and speech-language pathologists.



How to Communicate with Older Adults

5 Tips for Communicating with Older Adults

- 1. Avoid patronizing language and tone of voice:** Using terms such as “honey” or “sweetie”, or speaking in an exaggerated way, can seem disrespectful in conversation.
- 2. Monitor your body language:** Maintaining eye contact conveys respect and shows you care about the conversation. Be face-to-face whenever possible to allow the person to pick up on your facial expression and lip movement.
- 3. Minimize background noise:** Whenever possible, reduce noise unrelated to your communication. Doing so helps others better understand your speech.
- 4. Try asking questions in different ways:** Asking open-ended questions allows you to hear the other person’s point of view better, while yes/no questions or choice questions are easier for people with more significant communication impairments.
- 5. Keep it simple:** Short-term memory does decline over time, making it more difficult for older people to process complex sentences.

If the person you’re speaking to has trouble finding words or is difficult to understand

- **Don’t rely on “smile and nod”:** Instead of pretending to understand what someone has said, try saying “tell me in a different way” or asking them to show, write or draw when stuck on a word.
- **Don’t brush conversation aside:** If a word isn’t coming to someone, offer to come back to it later—don’t undermine by saying, “never mind” or suggesting it isn’t important.
- **Do provide options:** Ever had difficulty thinking of a word? Suggest words to the person struggling to help them find the vocabulary they are looking for.
- **Do repeat for clarification:** If you think you understand what someone is saying, ask if you’re correct. For example, “I think you said X. Is that right?”

If the person you’re speaking to has dementia

- **Go with the flow!:** Avoid correcting—instead, meet the person you’re talking to in their reality and focus on meaning, rather than the accuracy of the message.
- **Use proper nouns:** Using the name of a person instead of “she, he, they” can help the person to understand and remember the topics of your conversation.
- **Use cues:** Writing down words you’re discussing to remind a person what you’re talking about in a conversation is often helpful, as is using pictures and other visual cues to help them remember.
- **Avoid testing:** Commenting rather than asking questions can make a conversation less intense for someone with dementia. If you do ask a question, provide a choice. (“Coffee or tea?”)
- **Reminisce:** Speaking about the past often enables people with dementia to engage in a lengthier conversation.
- **Enjoy activities together:** Take the pressure off conversation alone. Gardening, eating, cooking, reading together or other simple activities can stimulate discussion in a natural way.