

Do Hear You What I Say?

Maybe It's Time to Make a Change!

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When someone is living with dementia, it is vital to appreciate the changes it makes in the person's ability to take in auditory data and make sense of it in a timely and effective fashion. Over the past few years we have learned a great deal to heighten our appreciation of what is happening that changes the brain's ability to comprehend messages. This includes messages that are delivered through speech versus writing, in a crowded space versus a one-on-one situation, or even a familiar voice versus one that is unfamiliar. Other hindrances to comprehension include an unfamiliar accent or rhythm of speech, the switching of subjects, or when emotion is embedded in the content rather than just information or words. Speed, inflection, rhythm, and association with other sensory cues can totally modify how the meaning of the content is taken in and processed.

One critical element that is often missed when trying to share information with or get information from a person living with dementia is the value of *changing* our delivery process. When we carry on traditional conversations we usually engage in a back and forth volley of information. As you can see in the example provided below.

In the first exchange Teepa and Tom both have intact abilities in all areas of communication. Teepa is standing in the kitchen at the refrigerator and Tom is in the living room at his computer.

Teepa: *"What do you want for dinner?"*

Tom: *"I'm not all that hungry. What do you have in the fridge that wouldn't be too much trouble and is lighter?"*

Teepa: *"It looks like I could do something with eggs or I could make a soup from left over vegetables and some canned beans I have."*

Tom: *"How about an omelet with some of the veggies?"*

Teepa: *"OK. Are you going to glass class after that? What time are you going to leave?"*

Tom: *"I need to pick up Jason and get pliers, so about 6:30 or so."*

Notice how one comment leads to the next and how the person getting the message internalizes it and then processes it and only then sends back a related but complex message of their own, moving the conversation and agenda forward for both of them.

In this second exchange, Tom has signs of language change that are consistent with Alzheimers in the early to mid-stages of the condition. Teepa is standing in the kitchen at the refrigerator and Tom is in the living room at his computer.

Teepa: *"What do you want for dinner?"*

Tom: *"What?"*

Teepa: *(louder) "What do you want to eat tonight?"*

Tom: *"I'm going out tonight."*

Teepa: *"I know that. I wanted to know what you wanted to eat for dinner."*

Tom: *"I have **gas** class tonight. I've got to take something with me. Do you remember what it is?"*

Teepa: *"I'm not talking about that right now. I'll tell you later. Right now I want to know what you want for dinner!"*

Tom: “Well, it sure **sounds** like you are talking to me right now! I don’t remember what it is I’m supposed to take to class, but it is something that I need. I better call the guy who is going with me and see if we are going to get dinner on the way there.”

Teepa: (comes to the living room doorway and puts her hands on her hips and raises her voice, sounding both frustrated and a little angry.) “What are you talking about?! You are going to eat here, before you go to **GLASS** class. Jason is going with you and you have to get your **PLIERS** out of the workshop before you go. Now for the last time, what do you want to **EAT** for dinner?”

Tom: “Nothing! I’m not hungry. Why are you yelling at me?!”

When one person gets dementia, it is important to realize that the three language skills that are essential for processing and sharing verbal messages will need to be isolated and supported as unique and special skills. The three core skills are:

- Vocabulary (the words – the meaning of the content)
- Comprehension (receptive language – the ability to GET the message)
- Speech production (expressive language – the ability to GIVE the message)

It is also important to understand that various dementias can affect these processes in very different ways. Alzheimer’s disease is not the same as vascular dementia, which is also not the same as what is experienced with primary progressive aphasia, or fronto-temporal dementia. Picking up on retained abilities and missing pieces can make all the difference in the world when trying to interact and support someone who is having trouble in one or more areas.

It is also vital to appreciate that there are often preserved or retained abilities that can support or help when trying to get a message across or obtain desired information from someone. These skills are related to rhythm skills and include:

- Social chit-chat (the back and forth that can mask loss of comprehension, but covers in short simple conversations)
- Rhythm of speech (this includes awareness of the rhythm of a question that is seeking an answer, as well as the ability to sustain rhythm or hear rhythm that sounds familiar. Additionally it can and does signal changes in emotion – changes in frequency, intensity, or volume can indicate shifts in emotional state or discomfort)
- Rhythmic speech as is present in music, poetry, prayer, counting, and even spelling

Learning to provide combination cues that use visual, verbal, and tactile data can enhance messages and promote better comprehension. Slowing down the exchanges and using reflective speech as well as pauses and simplified options can result in very different exchanges.

There are three important supportive phrases that can help when they are used in combination with **pauses**, inflections, visual cues, props, and partial reflective statements to confirm what was said or sought.

1. Seek more information – non-specific - “Tell me more” or “Tell me more about it.”
2. Seek demonstration or visual representation - “Could you show me how you would use it?” or “Could you show me what you would do with it?” or “Show me how you’d do it”
3. Offer simplified options – either/or options that are exclusionary (all possible options fit into one grouping or the other) - “Is it *this* or *that*?” “Is it *this* or something else?”

Here is a repeat of the second situation with these modifications:

(Teepa leaves the kitchen to come to the living room doorway carrying a wooden spoon in her hand. She knocks on the door frame.)

Teepa: *"Hey Tom, sorry to interrupt." She pauses, making sure Tom is looking up at her before proceeding in the conversation. She states. "I'm getting ready to fix dinner. Would you rather have soup or something else?"*

Tom: *"Soup or something else." Tom pauses and seems to be thinking. Then says, "What's the something else?" Teepa realizes Tom doesn't want soup, but is not sure what the other options are. She thinks through her other options.*

Teepa: *"So not soup, something else instead.... Hmmmm...., How about an omelet or a sandwich?"*

Tom: *"An omelet or a sandwich.... What's in the omelet?"*

Teepa: *"How about eggs and cheese and some veggies?"*

Tom: *"Eggs sound good and I love cheese, but what are veppies?"*

Teepa: *"So the eggs and cheese are good, but you aren't sure about the veppies? Let me show you what I've got and you can see what you think." Teepa goes to the fridge and gets out the leftover cooked broccoli and onions and brings them back to Tom. "Here are the things I have to put in with the eggs and the cheese for an omelet tonight." She pauses.*

Tom: *"Oh, those things are fine. I like them. I just didn't want those veppies you were talking about."*

Teepa: *"Great. I'm going to get to work fixing this. Can you come and set the table?" She gestures toward the kitchen and pauses, waiting for Tom to join her.*

In this exchange, Teepa has mastered many skills, and uses them well. When Tom doesn't know what veppies are, she doesn't need to correct his miscomprehension of the word veggies. Instead, she gets what she has from the refrigerator to show Tom so he can make the choice. She has let go of the idea that specific vocabulary is needed for communication and that Tom can lob the conversational ball back over the net to her with each volley. She now uses more effective strategies to get the message in and to appreciate the message that is being sent.

There is one more piece to talk about, however, before I wrap up this segment on **Language Matters** and **Making Changes** as we enter a new year. Teepa has one more BIG CHANGE to make; she needs to look inside and **notice** she has lost something. It's not there anymore and she is missing it. Sometimes more than others, but it is real and it is important. Her relationship with Tom is changing. She can't just throw out a conversational comment or idea and have him follow her lead. He is no longer taking a lead and giving her opportunities to follow. Teepa is having to actively think when she wants to communicate with Tom. Nothing is automatic anymore. Companionship and partnership is not what it was. So, two ideas:

1. Teepa and Tom may really benefit from creating opportunities and a schedule for episodes of fun and joy. Finding places in the day and in their life for music, poetry, song, dancing, playing instruments, or engaging in non-language related companionship or visually or physically oriented activities that both can share.
2. Teepa will want to develop some new or different opportunities to use her language skills and sustain her conversational talents and interests. Keeping herself satisfied with interactions and verbal exchanges will reduce the risk that she feels empty and depleted, so that her sharing with Tom is felt and seen as a positive and fruitful, not repetitive or frustrating.

As we enter this New Year, how will each of us learn to DO something new or *differently* that makes life a little better for those for whom we care and those who care for us?

- Happy New Year from Teepa and the Positive Approach™ Team!