

Dementia / Communicating with God

Claire: Hello, my name's Claire and I'm a Speech Pathologist. Sometimes I'm called a Speech *Therapist* but it means the same thing. I work at a hospital and part of my job is to help people talk, or, communicate, more easily. Some of the people I work with have dementia and I teach the nurses how to talk with these people more easily too.

Carol: Hi Claire, welcome to Women of Hope.

Claire: Thank you.

Carol: And welcome to you too, I'm Carol, and of course my good friend Tammy is here as well...

Tammy: Hi there – it's that special time again – to spend with you. We're so glad you could join us. How interesting to learn how to communicate more easily with someone with dementia. I haven't had to do that myself, but one of my best friends is dealing with a mother who has dementia. It's not only frustrating, but it's hurtful to her to try to take care of her dear mother who sometimes just doesn't remember things.

Carol: Claire, tell us a little about dementia first.

Claire: Sure. Dementia is a disease that affects the brain and can cause problems such as memory loss...difficulty understanding and using language...and problems with general thinking skills.

A person with dementia may also have changes in his or her personality as well as physical difficulties such as problems swallowing or walking.

Tammy: I didn't know that. So, is all dementia the same?

Claire: There are actually many types of dementia, and each type affects a person in a different way.

Do you know someone or have you met someone with dementia?... Is there someone in your family with dementia?... How do you feel when you're talking to them?... Do they understand what you say to them?

Tammy: I know with my friend, when she tries to talk with her mom it is so heartbreaking to know that Mom doesn't realize that she's her daughter.

Claire: Not all people with dementia have difficulty communicating, but if they do, there are many reasons for this. Here are some...

It might be because they were distracted by something else... Or maybe you spoke too quickly for them to follow along with what you were saying. Perhaps the way you put your words together was too complicated or just too long. But then it might be because their memory is not good enough to remember the whole sentence you've spoken to them. Or they may have forgotten the meanings of some words you used.

Tammy: This is good to remember; they may have been distracted by something. Maybe you spoke too quickly. Maybe the words were too complicated or too long.

Carol: It might be that they can't remember the whole sentence... or they may have forgotten the meanings of some of the words.

Claire: That's right. But perhaps it wasn't the *words* you were using that were confusing, but instead the *topic* might have been too difficult.

Tammy: Wow, there are so many things that can affect the conversation.

Claire: Yes, it can feel very frustrating and sometimes tiring.

Carol: It's great to be here with you on Women of Hope again today. We have Claire with us. She's a speech therapist and works mostly with older people. Today she's sharing some helpful ideas about communicating with a person with dementia.

Claire: Firstly, let me tell you a little about Jack, a man I know who has dementia. When I first met him, he did not seem very interested in the conversation...he just looked at me blankly a few times. He made comments that had nothing to do with what I had said. He also had trouble hearing me, so he kept asking me to repeat myself. Our whole conversation was quite frustrating. So I started making changes in the way I spoke with him, and that made a huge difference...

Tammy: So – what did you do?

Claire: Well, the first thing I do now, before talking with Jack, is to turn off the radio. He loves listening to the radio but he can't concentrate on listening to the songs and me at the same time. And because he's a bit deaf, he couldn't hear me very well over the music.

He also gets distracted if there's other noise coming from outside, or even when there's a newspaper sitting on his table. So I try to remove some of these things that distract him before I start to talk to him. Now, I close the door, or move the newspaper off the table.

The next thing I find helpful is to make sure he's looking at me...that way I know he's listening to me. Sometimes I gently tap him on the arm or even say his name to get his attention. Once he's looking at me, I start talking. And I love to start the conversation with a smile. He sometimes smiles back.

Tammy: That sounds good – so you really get his attention before you start having a conversation with him.

Claire: I do. Then while we're talking, I don't talk too quickly, or make lots of different comments quickly...that way Jack seems to find it easier to keep up with the conversation.

I make my sentences quite short and simple, and just say one point at a time. For example, if I'm telling him what I did on the weekend, I don't tell him all of the things I did in just a few sentences. I would say the first thing I did in one sentence and then stop. He has time to think about what I just said and make a comment himself.

Then I move onto the next point, and wait to see if he has something to say about that – after all, conversation is much nicer if both people have a chance to talk, not just me!

Carol: I think sometimes we think we have to keep the conversation going. We're afraid to stop and leave some space.

Claire: And it's especially important to leave some space for a person with dementia because they need time to think. Although saying one point at a time takes longer, it means Jack can take part in the conversation...and it's more enjoyable for both of us.

Just because he has difficulty keeping up with conversation does *not* mean he doesn't like chatting! Jack *loves* a good chat, and because he's older than me, he has lots of stories to share about his life.

Jack follows the conversation better if the topic is something he knows about...if it's about someone *he* knows, or an event that *he* took part in. If I start talking about an activity I did that he's not heard of before...and with friends he doesn't know, he gets confused and can't follow along. So we talk a lot about things that *he* knows...things that are about *him*, such as what he did on the weekend. We might talk about any other visitors he has coming. Or he might tell me some stories from his past. People with dementia often find it easier to remember things from the past - before they got dementia.

Tammy: Yes, I've noticed that too. So let's remember those things that make the conversation easier make sure there is not anything that will distract the person... Smile, and get their attention before you start talking... and don't speak too quickly.

Carol: Give the person time to think about what you've just said – and time to answer you if they want to – or respond to what you said.

And talk about things that they know about and can relate to...especially something *they* did.

Claire: Don't be afraid to ask questions about what *they've* done... give them a chance to tell stories about their past.

Jack's memory isn't very good and he seems to forget important details that I tell him. He can always remember his birthday and his address from 20 years ago though! It's new information that he finds hard to remember. Details that don't change – like his birthday, or memories of things before he got dementia – are often the last to be forgotten!

At the end of our conversation I always tell him when I'm going to visit again. I might say something like, "Jack, it was great to see you. Thanks for telling me the story about your pets. I'd like to hear more about that next time. By the way, I'm going to come back *next Wednesday*. I'll come at *lunch time*, around *12 o'clock* if that's alright. We can eat lunch together." These couple of sentences have a lot of information, but the day and time are the most important parts. So I usually repeat this in a short simple sentence, like "I'll be back next Wednesday, at 12 o'clock." He may not remember – but...he just might!

Carol: It's been interesting hearing about how to talk more easily with a person who has dementia. What about talking with someone who's had a stroke? That might be hard too.

Claire: It is – but that can be easier too if you know what to do.

Tammy: Could you tell us about that another time?

Claire: I'd love to. But I want to share some thoughts with you today about talking with someone else, someone I really like talking to.

The other person I like to talk with is God. Sometimes talking with God is called praying. Have you ever tried praying, or talking with God? Perhaps you feel anxious about talking with God because you're not sure what to say, or how to say it. Or you might be worried that God might not listen to you. Do you ever feel like that?

When I'm talking with Jack, I have to be careful how I say things, adjusting what I say to help him understand. There are also some topics that I just don't talk with him about because they're too complicated. But with God, it's different. I don't need to use fancy words, and no topic is too big or too small to talk with God about. I just tell God how I'm feeling and what's on my mind. I can tell him my worries, my thoughts, my ideas.

Thankfully I don't need to change the way I speak for God to hear me or understand me. And of course he can understand what we say no matter what language we speak. I can talk to God aloud or even silently because God can hear my silent prayers.

And rather than thinking that I'm just talking *to* God, I'm actually talking *with* God, because he might have something to say back to me. It's a two-way conversation, like when I'm talking with Jack. Jack talks while I listen, then I talk while Jack listens. In the same way, isn't it great to know that when we talk with God, he hears us! And he talks to us – especially through his word, the Bible.

There's a great example of this two-way conversation near the beginning of the Bible. It's a story about a man named Moses. You may have heard people on Women of Hope talk before about Moses. God gave him directions about how to lead God's people, the Israelites, out of slavery in Egypt. What a huge responsibility! But because conversation with God goes both ways, Moses often told God how he was feeling. He talked with God about his worries and concerns, and even how he felt like he wasn't the right man for the job! The first time God spoke to Moses was pretty amazing. We can read the story in Exodus chapter 3.

(Exodus 3:1-8 NIV) Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight— why the bush does not burn up."

⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

⁵ “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶ Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Carol: Moses was puzzled by this strange sight - seeing the bush in flames but not burning up! I would be too – wouldn't you? So he went closer to have a look.

What an amazing introduction to God for Moses! Imagine how surprised Moses was when he heard God calling his name from inside the bush. And Moses answered God – “Here I am,” he said. And do you remember what God said to him then? ...That's right...he told him not to come any closer and to take off his sandals because he was standing on *holy ground*.

Tammy: And then God introduced himself to Moses. He said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” Moses knew that God was to be respected. I'm sure he took off his sandals straight away but we're also told that he turned his face away because he was afraid to look at God. What an amazing introduction to God for Moses!

Claire: The story tells us how God heard the crying of the Israelites who were suffering in slavery. God hears *our* prayers just like he heard the Israelites. God is so loving and compassionate. I love how this story shows that God knows us personally; he knows our name, just like he called out to Moses using his name. God knows *your* name and wants to speak with you, *yes you!*

Yes, God knows my name and he knows your name. And he knows who you are. He knows all about you and he wants to talk with you.

So how can we really hear God speak to us? I've never heard a voice beaming out of a burning bush like Moses! The good news is that we have God's own word, the Bible to read. This is the main way God speaks to us. Have you ever read any parts of the Bible?

The amazing thing about the Bible is that it was written by God, but God used people to actually write it down. He put into their hearts and minds what he wanted them to write. That's why we love to share stories from the Bible with you each time we meet together.

The Bible is full of *stories* about real people who talked with God. It tells us about God's son, Jesus, too. The Bible helps me understand more about who God is and what he's like. The more I read of the Bible, the more I feel like I know God and how he wants me to live my life. It gives me advice on how to relate to other people. It even gives me advice on how to raise my little daughter.

The Bible is also full of *promises* that God has made to us. My favourite promise is that by believing in Jesus, and that he died and rose again to take away my sins, I will go to heaven when I die, to be with God forever. What a promise! It gives me hope, even when I'm feeling down! God never breaks his promises.

Some parts of the Bible seem confusing and hard to understand. So I often read the Bible with other people who understand it better than me. They explain the parts that I don't understand and we discuss what the Bible says about how God wants us to live. You might be able to do the same. Read it with someone else, or in a group – and talk together about what it means. Do you know someone who could help you read and understand the Bible better? You can contact us if you would like some help with reading the Bible. We will tell you how to contact us shortly.

Carol: We've come to the end of our time together today. Remember that God wants to talk with you. We don't need to be afraid of talking with God, but he does want us to talk with him in humility, which means to recognise who God is and that that he knows best. He knows you, remember – and he loves you. He wants you to share how you're really feeling and what you really need. He has promised in his word, the Bible that he will hear you.

Tammy: Thanks Claire, for helping us to know how to talk more easily with a person with dementia. And how God wants to talk with us too.

Claire: You're welcome – I'll come back again soon. Meanwhile, enjoy talking with God.

Carol: Remember – God wants you to talk to Him. We do hope you will be with us again. Have a great week filled with God's blessings.

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