



PEAK
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RESOURCES LLC

**Peak Development for ...
Home Health Aides®**

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Effective Communication with Aging Clients

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Describe behaviors that indicate effective listening/communication.
2. Identify factors that may affect the elder's ability to communicate.
3. Discuss ways to promote communication with elderly clients.

Current data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate



that over 43 million people in the US are age 65 and over. This is a larger number than at any previous time, and this number grows every year. By 2040, this population is expected to almost double, to over 81 million. Seniors age 65 and over also require health care at significantly higher rates than any other major age group. Therefore, it is clear that the elderly make up a significant percentage of the people in the US and for whom you will likely provide healthcare.

Healthcare providers must be knowledgeable in how best to communicate with the elderly, to promote safety and support. As a home health aide, you spend considerable amounts of time with your clients, and play an important role in helping to meet their needs.

This newsletter will discuss communication with the elderly, including ways to communicate effectively and how to manage communication barriers common to the elderly.

Communication

Communication is the sharing of thoughts, feelings and information. This can be done by speaking or writing, which are types of verbal communication. Or it can be nonverbal... through body position or facial expression.

Communication is very important in the home care setting. It allows

you to get the information you need about your assignment, arrive at the home with all of the supplies you need, and many other events that we take for granted every day. Effective communication with clients is just as important. Through listening and communication, you are able to find out what their needs are, and help to meet them.

Most people are usually sensitive to whether or not others are listening to or effectively communicating with them. Help clients to know that their communication is important by doing the following:



- Make eye contact to "connect" with the person, looking away now and then. People of some cultures may not be comfortable with prolonged eye contact.
- Lean forward a little - your body language tells the person you want to communicate.
- Ask questions now and then or nod your head, to show you're hearing what the person says.
- Don't do other things while you're talking or listening. Show the person they're worthy of your time.
- Show interest in what others have to say—you'll learn a lot.

Communicating with the Elderly

Age-related changes that can affect communication include hearing problems, slower processing of information, and a decline in memory. It is important, however, not

to make assumptions about someone based solely on their age, as wide variation exists. One 85-year old may be frail, with poor hearing and memory, while another may be strong, active and “sharp as a tack.” Base any modifications in your communication on what that individual’s needs actually are, not on what you assume they are, based on the person’s age. For example, when providing information to an elderly person, do not automatically raise your voice and speak at a slow rate. Use a normal tone and rate of speech, and if you find the person has difficulty understanding, then you can modify your communication.



When providing information to elderly clients who have difficulty communicating, writing down the information can reduce the amount they must process and remember. For example, if you are explaining to the elderly spouse of a client that she needs to call the agency to provide certain information, write down the information, including phone numbers and what information is required.

As with all people, showing respect is very important when communicating with seniors. One common pitfall that must be avoided is the use of “elderspeak.” This is a patronizing, belittling type of speech, similar to baby talk, that people may use with elders without even realizing it. The person using elderspeak may use a sing-song or high-pitched voice, call the elder “dear” or “young lady,” speak very slowly and loudly, use oversimplified words, or use language such as, “AND HOW ARE WE DOING TODAY?” Needless to say, this is very insulting and upsetting to elders. Show respect by calling clients by the name they prefer. One may want to be called “Mrs. Jones”... another may want to be called by his/her first name. Never use patronizing terms such as Gramps, Pops, Sweetie, Honey, Grandma or any other nickname, unless it is the name they have specifically requested. If you don’t know what their preferred name is, ask them or use their title and last name, such as “Mrs. Jones.” Also show respect by talking directly to the senior. If a elderly client’s daughter is with her, for example, speak to and make eye contact with both of them when providing information. Be careful not to address your remarks only to the younger person or act as if the senior is not present.

Age-Related Factors Affecting Communication

Physical and mental changes may occur with aging that impact communication. Factors that may

affect the elder’s ability to communicate include:

Hearing: Decline in hearing ability is common in people over age 65. To promote communication with those having hearing loss, face the person and maintain eye contact. Use expressions and hand gestures, as needed, to help with communication. Avoid standing in front of a window or bright light when talking. Many people with hearing loss depend on visual cues, such as mouth movements, to understand, and the glare coming from behind you makes it difficult for the person to see your face. It’s best if there is good lighting shining toward your face. Keep hands, papers and other items away from your face, and do not have gum, pencils, or other objects in or near your mouth that make it difficult for the person to understand you.

If the person indicates that hearing is better in one ear, talk toward that side. Speak clearly, at a moderate volume and rate. Some elders find it easiest to understand when the rate of speech is slightly slowed. Do not exaggerate your mouth movements or shout. If the person does not understand something you said, re-phrase it another way, rather than simply repeating the same words over.

Understanding and processing: For some elders, the ability to understand and process information declines or slows down. Allow the person a little extra time to process and respond to what you are saying, before moving on to the next point. Check for understanding by asking, “Did I explain that clearly?” or “Do you have any questions?” Watch for non-verbal behavior that may indicate lack of understanding, such as a furrowed brow or blank stare.



Memory: A decline in memory, such as with Alzheimer’s disease or other types of dementia, makes it difficult or impossible for the affected person to remember recent events. This may cause some clients repeat stories, questions, concerns or requests many times. Listen and be patient with them. Ask the client to tell you stories from when they were younger. Events from long ago are often remembered more clearly than recent events.

As a home health aide, your role as a communicator is central to your job functions in working with your clients. By understanding and focusing on the needs of your elderly clients, you help to meet their needs, promote their safety, and provide comfort and support.



**Effective Communication
with Aging Clients**

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- ____1. The elderly population is expected to decline over the next 30 years, due to increasing death rates from heart disease and cancer in this group.
A. True
B. False
- ____2. Which of the following best defines communication?
A. sharing thoughts, feelings and information
B. talking
C. listening while someone tells you something
D. speaking in front of a group
- ____3. A client frowns and wrinkles his nose when looking at his breakfast. This demonstrates which of the following types of communication?
A. verbal
B. nonverbal
C. both verbal and nonverbal
D. neither verbal nor nonverbal
- ____4. Communication with clients is important because it helps to:
A. identify their needs
B. meet their needs
C. provide support
D. all of the above
- ____5. Behaviors that help others know that they are being heard include all of the following EXCEPT:
A. making eye contact with the person
B. nodding your head in response to the other person's comments
C. leaning forward slightly during the conversation
D. continuing with tasks while the other person talks

- ___ 6. All elderly persons require some type of communication modification to help them understand, such as speaking loudly or repeating phrases.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ___ 7. When a client has not specified a preferred name, the home health aide should:
- A. call the client by an affectionate term, such as honey
 - B. call the client by whatever name the other staff members use
 - C. use the client's title and last name
 - D. avoid using any names for that client
- ___ 8. "Elderspeak" is a special technique of talking to the elderly that promotes their self-esteem and independence, and enhances communication.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ___ 9. When talking with an elderly client who has difficulty hearing, the home health aide should do all of the following EXCEPT:
- A. maintain eye contact
 - B. use expression and hand gestures
 - C. stand so that light is coming from behind the home health aide
 - D. keep hands, papers and other objects away from his/her mouth
- ___ 10. Mrs. Grant is an elderly client who has difficulty hearing. When the home health aide says to her, "Let's get you cleaned up.", Mrs. Grant does not understand what was said. To help Mrs. Grant understand, the home health aide should:
- A. say, "It's time for your bath" while pointing toward the bathroom
 - B. take Mrs. Grant's arm and pull her toward the bathroom
 - C. repeat, "Let's get you cleaned up." several times very loudly
 - D. stop trying to communicate and just proceed with the bath

