

Virtual visits for loved ones with dementia

Communications tips for family and friends



Remaining socially active is an important part of psychosocial wellness and remains possible during every stage of dementia.

As the disease progresses, **non-verbal communication plays a bigger role.** Non-verbal communication includes writing, gestures, signs or signals, behaviours and displays of emotion. Please be aware it's essential to match what you say to what your face, body, and tone of voice are saying. When this doesn't happen, your loved one can get confused and will follow your non-verbal (or physical) actions despite what you are saying to them. Remember that dementia may also cause sensory changes. Your loved one may be more sensitive to noise and certain tones that may require you to adapt for a successful virtual visit.

Tips to support a virtual visit

Use simple words during your visit and go at the same pace as your loved one.

Example: When they go slow, you go slow too.

Give your loved one time to respond to you as they may need time to find their words. This shows your interest and conveys listening.

Example: Pause to allow for thinking, remain quiet. Keep your face in a pleasant or neutral expression

Your loved one may sometimes live in the past. It's helpful for you go to wherever they are in their memory. This is called validation. Avoid correcting them. Trying to bring them into the present may upset them as they can't recognize the present. By not correcting who you are to them, but instead encouraging their memory, supports your loved one in a positive way.

Example: If you hear something like: "Remember the time when we climbed the great oak tree by the river?" (They think you are their sister/brother) You could say: "I can't recall that, can you refresh my memory and tell me what you remember?"

If your loved one is sharing a story, ask questions to get more information about their story. Use a questioning word (e.g. tell, how, why) that encourages them to keep talking.

Example: “Tell me about how you found your dog Benji after he ran away.” Rather than: “Did you find Benji when he ran away?”

Your loved one may repeat the same questions or stories. Listen carefully, go where they are (validate), and change the subject gently when you can, rather than reminding them that they have already said something. Maintain a pleasant facial expression and respond.

Example:

When dad keeps talking about going to work...listen to what he is saying and validate his concern.

You could say: “I hear you want to go to the construction site”.

Then say: “I know how important work is to you and you get busy at work”

Then say: “Keeping busy helps the time pass”

Then say: “Tell me how you liked to pass the time when you were a child, what were your favourite things to do?”

When your loved one is upset validate and acknowledge their feelings. If feelings are not validated this creates the notion that their feelings don't matter.

Example: “I see you are upset and seem angry. Can you tell me what's making you angry?”

Avoid arguing with your loved one if they are arguing with you. When appropriate, shift to another topic. Arguing with your loved one will upset them more. Try to listen and validate their feelings. This helps to settle things and shows your support. Allow the arguing while you make eye contact and nod to show you understand what they are saying.

For further information, please also refer to the Family guide for virtual visits at vch.ca/virtualhealth.