Understanding Dementia-Related Changes in Communication and Behavior
Objectives for this workshop

- To better understand Dementia (Alzheimer’s disease)
- To learn the principles and practical techniques in communication
- To learn the principles and practical techniques in understanding and addressing challenging behaviors
What is Dementia?

- A syndrome that describes a cluster of symptoms which can be reversible or progressive
- Dementia itself is not a disease or a specific diagnosis
- Dementia is NOT a part of the normal aging process
Irreversible vs. Reversible Dementia

Dementia

Irreversible (90%)
- Alzheimer’s Disease
- Lewy Body Dementia
- Frontal Temporal Dementia
- Vascular Dementia
- Alcohol Related

Potentially Reversible (10%)
- Depression
- Metabolic Problems
- Medications: adverse reactions
- Infections
- Brain Tumors
- Sensory Loss
- Nutritional Deficiencies
Alzheimer’s Disease

Most common type of Dementia (60 – 80%)

- Memory changes that disrupt daily life
- Challenges in planning or solving problems
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble with visual images and spatial relationships
- New problems with words in speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood and personality
Normal Brain
Alzheimer’s Brain
What changes?

- Memory
- Language/Communication
- Executive Functions
- Visual-Spatial Perception
- Behavior
Communication Challenges
Three major parts in human face to face communication

- 55% of impact is determined by body language - postures, gestures, eye contact
- 38% by the tone of voice
- 7% by the content or the words used in the communication process
What happens when the parts of communication start breaking down?
Alzheimer’s Disease: A Disease of Emotions

Confusion  Discomfort  Behavior
Principles for Communicating

- Understand what is and isn’t possible to change; set realistic expectations
- Thoughts, beliefs and actions significantly impact behavior
- All behavior has meaning
- Connecting overrides the task
- Join in the reality of the person with dementia
Common Communication Challenges

- Word finding difficulties
- Making up words
- Can’t speak in complete sentences
- Forgets English, if it is a second language
- May not understand what you are saying
- Inability to speak (but may understand)
- Problems reading and writing
- May not speak but can sing or recite prayers
Steps to Compassionate Communication
1. Be a Good Listener

- Express interest
- Don’t interrupt
- Focus on feelings
- Be patient
2. Facilitate a Connection

- Establish eye contact
- Use touch and gestures
- Use a calm voice
- Speak simply and slowly
3. Check the Environment

- Be in plain view
- Avoid bright and dark settings
- Set aside a quiet place or time
- Reduce distractions
4. Adjust Your Approach

- Think ahead
- Give simple instructions
- Ask one question at a time
- Be mindful of facial expressions and body language
Effective Communication

DO

• Repeat
• Accept blame
• Take a break if things aren’t going well
• Agree
• Use distraction

DON’T

• Reason
• Argue/confront
• Remind
• Question recent memory
• Take it personally
Benefits of Compassionate Communication

Fosters self-esteem

Reduces frustration

Strengthens independence

Enhances relationship

Benefits
Understanding Difficult Behaviors
Common Behavior Challenges

- Pacing, wandering
- Impulsiveness
- Agitation, aggression
- Loss of inhibition
- Repetitive questioning
- Resistance
Why Do Behavioral Problems Occur?

The breakdown of brain structures caused by the plaques, tangles and atrophy (neuronal death) result in:

- Mood swings
- Loss of understanding & logic
- Perseveration
- Disinhibition
- Difficult & agitated behaviors
Why Do Behavioral Problems Occur?

- Person with dementia experiences world differently
- Behaviors may not make sense to us but they make total sense in the experience and perception of client
- Important to enter their world in order to understand their experiences (empathy)
Why Do Behavioral Problems Occur?

- Lack of short term memory, confusion, fear and other problems may cause agitation, anger and/or frustration
- Delusions or hallucinations that are very real to the individual
- A decreased ability to negotiate surroundings
Understanding Why Difficult Behavior Occurs

Investigate

• What exactly was the behavior? Is it harmful to the individual or others?
• Did something trigger the behavior?
• What happened immediately before and after the behavior?
• How did witnesses react?
• Try to identify the cause
Understanding Why Difficult Behavior Occurs

**Investigate**

Often, it’s physical discomfort or something medical:

- were they thirsty / hungry?
- Do they have to go to the bathroom?
- Too hot or too cold?
- Not feeling well? In pain?
- UTI
- Overmedicated?
- Overwhelmed?
Investigate
Sometimes it’s environmental:

- Excess stimulation; i.e. too much activity or noise; too many people
- Loud or unidentifiable noises
- Too bright or too dark settings in hallway, rooms
- Mirrors or other reflecting surfaces, patterned wallpaper
- Too many changes in routine
Ask the Family Members Questions

Knowing about the person helps to

- Understand client’s perceptions & experience
- Understand why he/she is behaving a certain way
- Manage the problematic behavior using client specific interventions
The Importance of Knowing the Person

- Preferred routines
- Habits
- Likes/dislikes
- Preferences
- Pet peeves
- What distracts client effectively?
- What causes client distress?
- What calms client?
Resources

In Orange County, CA:
Alzheimer’s Orange County’s
Helpline: 844-HELP-ALZ (844-435-7259)
www.alzoc.org

National Alzheimer's Association:
24/7 HELPLINE 800-272-3900
www.alz.org