

# Enhancing Communication with Older Adults with Cognitive Impairment in Healthcare Settings

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## Abstract

The aging global population has led to a rise in cognitive impairments, including dementia, presenting significant communication challenges in health care. Effective communication with cognitively impaired older adults is vital for ensuring their understanding, cooperation, and well-being. This narrative review explores evidence-based communication strategies to enhance interactions with this vulnerable population. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across databases such as PubMed, Medline, and PsycINFO, covering publications from 2010 to December 2024. Findings highlight the importance of verbal communication strategies, including simplified language, clear articulation, repetition, and rephrasing, to address comprehension difficulties. Nonverbal approaches, such as maintaining eye contact, using appropriate gestures, and active listening, are equally critical in fostering trust and promoting therapeutic relationships. By tailoring communication to the unique needs of cognitively impaired individuals, healthcare professionals can enhance patient engagement, improve decision-making, and ensure dignified care. This review underscores the necessity of integrating effective communication techniques into healthcare practices and emphasizes ongoing training for professionals to meet the challenges posed by the growing prevalence of cognitive impairments. These strategies are essential to improving patient outcomes and advancing the quality of geriatric care.

**Keywords:** Cognitive impairment, communication, dementia, geriatric care, older people

## INTRODUCTION

The global population is aging at an unprecedented pace. The number of people aged 60 and above is expected to increase from 1 billion in 2020 to 2.1 billion by 2050.<sup>[1]</sup> In Iraq, older adults represent 4.4% of the population.<sup>[2]</sup> This demographic shift is expected to result in a substantial increase in age-related diseases, particularly cognitive impairments.<sup>[1]</sup> In line with this, the International Federation of Alzheimer's and Dementia Associations estimates that around 55 million people worldwide currently live with dementia, a figure projected to nearly double every 20 years, reaching 78 million by 2030 and 139 million by 2050.<sup>[3]</sup> The growing burden of cognitive impairment poses substantial challenges to healthcare systems globally.

In an article published in the National Library of Medicine by Randhawa and Varghese titled "Geriatric Evaluation and Treatment of Age-Related Cognitive Decline," Randhawa and Varghese demonstrated that cognitive impairment in older adults exists on a spectrum, ranging from the cognitive

changes associated with normal aging to mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and, ultimately, to dementia. Randhawa and Varghese also reported that globally, among adults aged 60 and older, the prevalence of MCI ranges from approximately 7% to 25%, and MCI is 3–4 times more common than dementia.<sup>[4]</sup> Furthermore, Campbell *et al.*, in a comprehensive narrative review published in the *Clinical Geriatric Medicine* journal, revealed that the likelihood of progression from MCI to any form of dementia is 3–5 times higher than in those with normal cognition.<sup>[5]</sup>

Fymat, in his comprehensive analysis "On Dementia and Other Cognitive Disorders," conceptualized dementia as

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**Submitted:** 07-Jan-2025 **Revised:** 12-Feb-2025  
**Accepted:** 18-Feb-2025 **Published:** 31-Mar-2025

### Access this article online

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**Website:**  
<https://journals.lww.com/ircm>

**DOI:**  
10.4103/IRJCM.IRJCM\_2\_25

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**How to cite this article:** Mishari AK, Ali MA. Enhancing communication with older adults with cognitive impairment in healthcare settings. *IRAQI J COMMUNITY MED* 2025;38:107-11.

an umbrella term for various diseases that affect memory, cognitive abilities, and behavior, significantly interfering with the ability to perform daily activities. Fymat's analysis further elucidated the nature of dementia as a slow and progressive syndrome that begins gradually and worsens over several years and is categorized into three distinct stages: early, middle, and late.<sup>[6]</sup> According to the WHO, Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia, accounting for 60%–70% of cases, followed by vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, and frontotemporal dementia.<sup>[7]</sup>

A large cross-sectional study on communication behaviors in cognitively impaired older adults, conducted in two hospitals in southwest Germany, found that cognitive impairment significantly impacts communication, resulting in challenges with expression, comprehension, and information processing. The study also highlighted that poor communication can adversely affect patients' cooperation, well-being, and healthcare decisions.<sup>[8]</sup>

This literature review aims to explore the essential skills and strategies for enhancing communication with cognitively impaired older adults. Furthermore, it seeks to provide healthcare professionals with practical insights and approaches to improve interactions with this vulnerable population, ultimately enhancing patient outcomes and the quality of care in geriatric settings.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review article employed a comprehensive literature search across multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, Medline, PsycINFO, CINAHL, and Google Scholar. The search was conducted using relevant keywords related to communication with older adults (aged 60 and over) with cognitive impairment of any degree. The search covered publications from January 1, 2010 to December 1, 2024, to ensure the inclusion of the most recent and relevant data.

Studies, reviews, and guidelines that explored practical communication strategies, interventions, and tools applicable to healthcare settings and that were available in English, were included. In addition, reference lists of selected articles were manually reviewed to identify further relevant sources. Studies that were unavailable in full text or lacked essential data were excluded. A narrative synthesis approach was utilized to summarize the findings, providing a cohesive overview of the current state of knowledge on the topic.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Strategies for enhancing communication

A systematic review of the application of communication interventions and their outcomes in the care of people with cognitive impairment demonstrated that these individuals often face significant challenges, including memory deficits, language impairments, and reduced attention span. These cognitive limitations issues can substantially hinder their

ability to effectively communicate their needs and concerns. The review further highlighted that improving communication requires a combination of verbal and nonverbal strategies, which are essential for bridging communication gaps. Such strategies help ensure that the needs and preferences of patients with cognitive impairment are both understood and respected.<sup>[9]</sup> Similarly, another systematic review confirmed that effective communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is vital in establishing therapeutic relationships with patients with cognitive impairment. This communication is essential for understanding and addressing the needs of these patients in alignment with their diagnosis.<sup>[10]</sup>

A double-blind, peer-reviewed review article by Denning and Brown investigated a person-centered approach to identifying and managing the risks and challenges of dementia care. Denning and Brown revealed that behavioral and psychological changes often linked to cognitive impairment – such as anxiety, depression, and agitation – can hinder communication. The review highlighted that the effective use of both verbal and nonverbal communication allows healthcare professionals to foster meaningful interactions, which are crucial for preserving the dignity and autonomy of individuals with cognitive decline and enhancing their quality of life.<sup>[11]</sup>

### Verbal communication strategies

Verbal communication is the process of using spoken words to share information with other people.<sup>[12]</sup> Pepper, in her review on dementia and communication, emphasized that verbal communication is essential for effective interactions with cognitively impaired patients. It plays a crucial role in forming relationships, expressing needs, and conveying emotions.<sup>[13]</sup> However, substantial evidence suggests that when interacting with cognitively impaired older adults, verbal communication alone may be insufficient due to the limitations imposed by their condition. The challenges in verbal communication with this population arise from difficulties in understanding and expressing language. These patients may struggle to find the right words, maintain conversational flow, or interpret complex instructions.<sup>[8,9,14]</sup>

To address these challenges, healthcare professionals must remain attentive, flexible, and adaptive in their communication approach. They should constantly evaluate the effectiveness of their methods and make adjustments as needed. Several evidence-based strategies can be employed to facilitate effective and supportive verbal communication:

### Simplified language and short sentences

Cognitively impaired older adults often face challenges in understanding complex language and lengthy sentences.<sup>[9]</sup> Research consistently highlights the importance of using simple and clear language, with a calm and gentle tone, when speaking with cognitively impaired older adults.<sup>[15,16]</sup> This approach minimizes confusion and aids in processing information, enabling patients to respond more accurately.<sup>[14]</sup> For example, instead of asking, "Do you have any concerns about your medication regimen?" a healthcare professional might say, "Do

you have any questions about your medicine?” In addition, healthcare professionals should avoid using medical jargon and technical terms, as these can be confusing and overwhelming for patients.<sup>[17]</sup>

### *Speaking slowly and clearly*

Articulation and pacing are crucial when communicating with older adults, especially those with cognitive impairments that affect their processing speed.<sup>[18]</sup> Speaking slowly and clearly allows the patient more time to process each word and sentence, reducing the likelihood of misunderstanding.<sup>[12,16]</sup> This approach can also reduce anxiety and frustration, allowing patients to respond more confidently.<sup>[15]</sup> Rushing through instructions or explanations often overwhelms these individuals, making it difficult for them to keep up.<sup>[19]</sup> In addition, this approach demonstrates respect and patience, fostering a more positive and supportive environment for communication.<sup>[20]</sup>

### *Repetition and rephrasing*

Cognitive impairment often affects memory and the ability to understand complex information.<sup>[9,20]</sup> By repeating key points and instructions, healthcare professionals can reinforce important information, thereby enhancing the patient's understanding.<sup>[21]</sup> In addition, rephrasing the same information using different words can enhance clarity and aid in comprehension, particularly if the patient did not understand the original phrasing.<sup>[18]</sup> For example, after explaining a medication schedule, a healthcare professional might say, “So, you will take this pill every morning,” and then, later confirm, “Remember to take this medication every day when you wake up.” This strategy can help individuals retain information and reduce the likelihood of confusion or anxiety.<sup>[16]</sup>

### *Allowing extra time for responses*

Cognitive impairments can slow an individual's ability to comprehend what has been said and to formulate and articulate responses.<sup>[8]</sup> Healthcare professionals should build in ample time for the older adult to process questions and provide answers. Rushing these individuals or interrupting their thought process can further hinder communication.<sup>[18]</sup> Patience and allowing a comfortable pause before expecting a reply can facilitate more productive exchanges.<sup>[14]</sup>

Using these verbal communication strategies allows healthcare professionals to more effectively share information, prompt responses, and foster a supportive and engaging conversation with older adults who have cognitive problems.

### **Nonverbal communication strategies**

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines nonverbal communication as the exchange of information without the use of words or spoken language. This form of communication primarily relies on body language, including facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, posture, and touch. In addition, nonverbal aspects of speech, such as tone, volume, pitch, pauses, fluency, and the speed of speech, can further convey or modify the meaning of spoken words.<sup>[22]</sup> Notably, the majority of communication is attributed to the nonverbal component,

accounting for about 93% of effective communication. According to Mehrabian, words, body language, and vocal tones contribute 7%, 55%, and 38%, respectively, to effective communication.<sup>[23]</sup> In an exploratory study aimed at identifying methods and approaches for improving communication with individuals with moderate-to-severe dementia, Collins *et al.* demonstrated that nonverbal communication can enhance verbal communication. This form of communication provides a means to express complex emotions and maintain connections between people.<sup>[24]</sup>

In a literature review on communication difficulties associated with dementia, Banovic *et al.* highlighted that communicating with older adults who have cognitive impairments, particularly those with dementia, is often challenging due to the decline in verbal communication skills. Patients with dementia frequently struggle with verbal communication, facing issues with word selection, sentence structure, comprehension, and memory retention. Despite these challenges, nonverbal communication often remains relatively intact and can serve as a crucial channel for interaction.<sup>[15]</sup> This makes it essential for healthcare professionals and caregivers to recognize and effectively utilize nonverbal cues.<sup>[13,24]</sup> Consequently, healthcare professionals must adeptly integrate both verbal and nonverbal communication methods to ensure effective interaction and address the comprehensive needs of cognitively impaired older adults.<sup>[16]</sup> Key nonverbal communication strategies include:

#### *Eye contact*

Maintaining appropriate eye contact is essential in nonverbal communication.<sup>[12,25]</sup> It helps in gaining the patient's attention, conveying respect, interest, and empathy and demonstrating active listening.<sup>[16,26]</sup> For cognitively impaired patients, direct eye contact can also provide reassurance and a sense of connection.<sup>[13]</sup> However, it is important to avoid intense staring, which might be perceived as confrontational or distressing.<sup>[17]</sup> Instead, short, gentle glances can effectively demonstrate care without overwhelming the patient.<sup>[13]</sup>

#### *Facial expressions*

Facial expressions are a powerful tool in nonverbal communication.<sup>[27]</sup> A warm and friendly expression can help in easing anxiety and building trust with the patient.<sup>[28]</sup> Smiling, for instance, can create a positive environment and make patients feel more comfortable.<sup>[14,19,26]</sup> Conversely, negative expressions, such as frowning or showing impatience, should be avoided as they can increase stress and confusion in patients.<sup>[13]</sup> Healthcare professional should be mindful to their facial expressions, as they can significantly impact the patient's emotional state and willingness to engage in communication.<sup>[20]</sup>

#### *Gestures*

Gestures are movements of the body, especially the hands and head, used to express ideas or meanings.<sup>[25]</sup> Simple and clear gestures can complement verbal communication and help in conveying instructions or information.<sup>[20,29]</sup> Gestures can emphasize key points and keep the patient engaged.<sup>[19]</sup>

Pointing to objects or using hand movements to illustrate actions can be helpful, especially when verbal instructions are misunderstood.<sup>[16,26]</sup> However, gestures should be deliberate and gentle to avoid startling the patient.<sup>[18,25]</sup>

### *Body posture*

Maintaining an open and relaxed body posture can create a welcoming atmosphere and make the patient feel more at ease.<sup>[18]</sup> Leaning slightly forward shows interest and attentiveness, signaling to the patient that they are being heard and valued.<sup>[13]</sup> It is important to avoid crossing arms or turning away, as these can be interpreted as disinterest or frustration.<sup>[25]</sup> Sitting at an appropriate distance and positioning oneself at eye level can also help minimize feelings of intimidation and foster a sense of connection.<sup>[17-19]</sup>

### *Appropriate touch*

Appropriate and gentle touch can be a powerful tool in building rapport and demonstrating care and concern.<sup>[20,30]</sup> Simple actions like holding a patient's hand or a light touch on the shoulder can be reassuring and may help calm agitated patients.<sup>[16,26]</sup> However, healthcare professionals should be mindful of patient boundaries and cultural differences regarding touch, seeking permission and carefully observing the patient's comfort level.<sup>[18,25]</sup>

### *Active listening*

Active listening is a crucial communication skill that requires careful attention not only to the spoken words but also to the body language expressed by the speaker.<sup>[13,27,29]</sup> It involves fully concentrating, understanding, and responding in a manner that demonstrates genuine interest in the patient's needs and concerns.<sup>[18]</sup> This practice includes using appropriate nonverbal cues such as nodding, maintaining eye contact, and employing suitable facial expressions, along with brief verbal affirmations like "I see" or "I understand," which signal that the healthcare professional is engaged and attentive.<sup>[29]</sup> Active listening is especially important for cognitively impaired patients, as it helps them feel heard and valued, which is essential for building trust and encouraging them to share their thoughts and feelings, thereby fostering a more meaningful dialog.<sup>[20,28]</sup>

The goal of these nonverbal communication strategies is to create an environment where the older adult feels heard, respected, and empowered to express their thoughts, needs, and preferences.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the growing population of older adults with cognitive impairments, enhancing communication in healthcare settings is paramount. This review highlights the critical need for healthcare professionals to adopt both verbal and nonverbal communication strategies tailored to the unique challenges faced by cognitively impaired individuals.

Effective communication not only fosters better understanding and cooperation but also significantly enhances the quality of

care and patient outcomes. By employing simplified language, speaking slowly, and allowing adequate time for responses, healthcare providers can create a supportive environment that respects the dignity and autonomy of older adults. Furthermore, integrating nonverbal cues – such as maintaining eye contact, using appropriate gestures, displaying warm facial expressions, and practicing active listening – can strengthen connections and convey empathy.

As the prevalence of cognitive impairments continues to rise, ongoing training and awareness among healthcare professionals regarding effective communication techniques will be essential. By prioritizing these strategies, we can ensure that older adults with cognitive impairments receive the compassionate and effective care they deserve, ultimately promoting their well-being and quality of life.

### **Financial support and sponsorship**

Nil.

### **Conflicts of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

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