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Ageing Well

WP3/ A1 Training Programme

Module 4

Effective ways to communicate with the elders

Hellenic Association of Positive Psychology
(HAPPSY)





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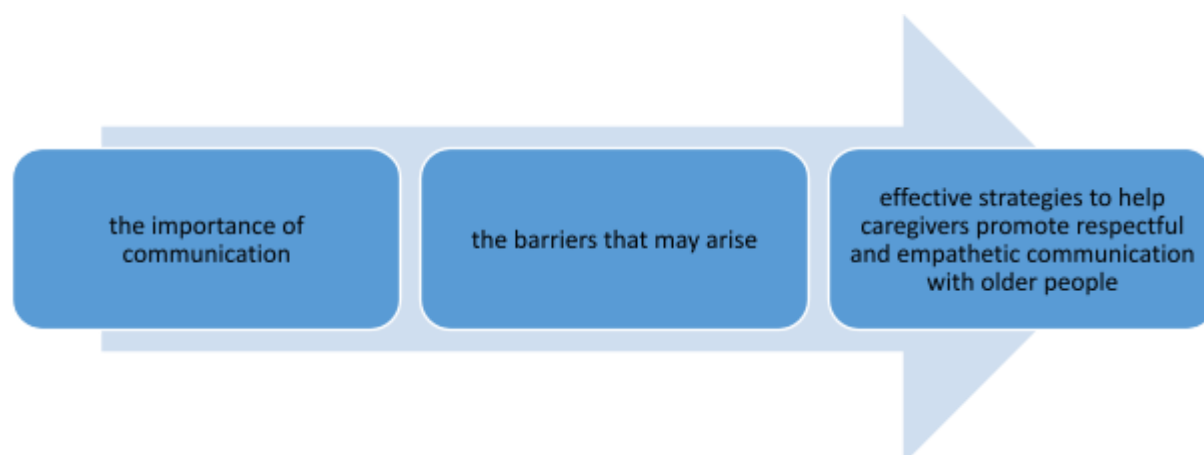
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As people age, their communication needs may change due to physical, cognitive, or emotional factors. Effective communication is a vital skill in caring for older adults, fostering understanding, trust, and emotional connection (Jack et al., 2019). This Module explores:



Objectives

At the end of this module, participants will be able to:

1. explain at least three reasons why effective communication with older adults is crucial for their well-being and care.
2. identify at least three common communication barriers faced by older adults and demonstrate two specific techniques to overcome these barriers in real-life scenarios.
3. implement at least two practical strategies to build trust, show empathy, and promote respect during interactions with older adults, as evidenced through role-playing or case study discussions.

1. The importance of communication with older people

Effective communication with older adults is crucial for multiple reasons, primarily because it impacts their overall well-being, self-esteem, and quality of life (O'Rourke et al., 2018). As people age, they may face challenges such as physical impairments, cognitive decline, social isolation, or loss of independence, which can significantly impact their well-being. Research highlights that social isolation and loneliness in older adults can impair the

immune system, elevate stress, and increase depression and anxiety (Shankar et al., 2011). Meaningful communication with caregivers can alleviate these challenges by addressing older adults' basic needs and promoting quality of life and active aging.

1.1 Communication and Older Adults' Basic Needs

Communication is essential for meeting an older adult's basic needs, including emotional security, physical care, and social interaction. Open and clear communication allows caregivers to understand the specific needs of the elderly—whether that involves managing pain, maintaining hygiene, or seeking comfort. This exchange of information ensures that their needs are met in a timely and appropriate manner (Sharkiya, 2023).

1.2 Enhancing Well-being and Quality of Life

Regular, positive communication has been shown to improve older adults' emotional and psychological well-being. It helps them maintain their identity, preserve their dignity, and stay socially connected. Engaging them in conversations, encouraging them to share their thoughts and feelings, and showing interest in their past experiences contribute to their mental stimulation and emotional satisfaction (Fakoya et al., 2020).

1.3 Promoting Active Aging

Communication is fundamental in promoting active aging, as it helps older adults remain socially engaged, participate in decision-making regarding their care, and stay involved in community activities. Effective communication empowers older individuals to live healthier, more fulfilling lives (Marzo et al, 2023).

2. Barriers to communication between older people and caregivers

Numerous barriers may hinder effective interaction between older adults and caregivers. Research shows that common communication barriers include:

- sensory impairments (e.g., hearing loss or vision problems),
- cognitive decline (e.g., dementia or memory loss), and



- language differences (e.g., different native languages or speech impairments due to stroke) (Whitson, et al., 2018).

Additionally,

- ageism and stereotypes about aging can provoke biases in communication, leading to patronizing or dismissive behaviours (Donizzetti, 2019).

When there are difficulties, two main communication patterns are identified (Ryan et al., 1986):

1. Under-accommodations, which occur when communicators ignore age-related changes in speaking and listening, leading to potential social isolation and misunderstanding, and
2. Over-accommodations, which arise from over-reliance on negative stereotypes that may be insulting and patronizing (e.g., "elderspeak" or "secondary baby talk"), potentially alienating older adults from meaningful interaction and making them question their own communicative abilities.

2.1 Warning signs of communication difficulties

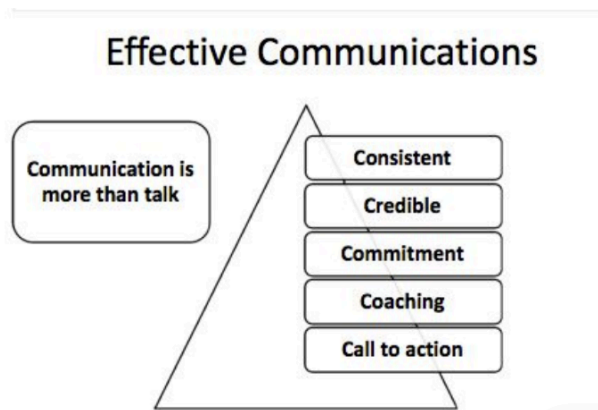
It is essential for caregivers to monitor warning signs that indicate communication difficulties. These signs include:

- Repeated misinterpretations of information.
- Signs of frustration, such as irritability or withdrawal from conversation.
- Difficulty following conversations or providing appropriate responses.
- Sudden changes in behaviour, such as silence or anger, during discussions.

When these signs are observed, caregivers must take steps to adjust their communication methods and ensure that older adults feel heard, respected, and understood (Nussbaum et al., 2000).



3. Basic conditions of communication with older people



Communication is more than talk. To communicate effectively with older adults, certain basic conditions must be established so as older individuals feel comfortable expressing themselves. These conditions include trust, empathy, respect, and non-violent communication.

3.1 Trust

Trust is a foundation of any meaningful relationship, especially in caregiving. Older adults must trust their caregivers to provide compassionate and competent care. Building trust requires consistency, honesty, and reliability. Caregivers should listen actively, keep promises, and maintain confidentiality to foster trust (Zegwaard et al., 2017).

3.2 Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. When communicating with older adults, caregivers should strive to put themselves in “the other person’s shoes”, acknowledging their emotions and responding with compassion. Empathy reduces feelings of isolation and frustration by validating older adults’ experiences (Jack, 2022).

3.3 Respect

Respect involves recognizing the dignity and worth of older adults, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities. Caregivers should avoid infantilizing or patronizing speech, instead engaging older adults as equals. This includes using appropriate language, maintaining eye contact, and respecting personal space and boundaries (Kwame & Petrucka, 2021).



3.4 Non-Violent Communication

Non-violent communication (NVC) is a communication method that emphasizes expressing oneself clearly and compassionately without blame, criticism, or judgment. Developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, NVC consists of four components: observations, feelings, needs, and requests. When communicating with older adults, caregivers should:

1. Observe the situation without judgment.
2. Identify and express their feelings about the situation.
3. Communicate their needs or desires.
4. Make clear and respectful requests for action.

NVC encourages caregivers to approach communication with older adults calmly and constructively, minimizing conflict and promoting understanding (Rosenberg, 2015).

4. Strategies and tips to build trust and promote empathy

Building trust and promoting empathy in interactions with older adults requires a combination of communication skills and thoughtful behavior. The following strategies can help caregivers foster positive relationships with the older people they care for (Jack et al., 2019):

1. Active Listening

Active listening involves fully concentrating on the speaker, understanding their message, responding thoughtfully, and remembering what was said. Caregivers should give older adults their full attention, avoid interrupting, and ask clarifying questions when needed. This shows that their thoughts and feelings are valued.

2. Use of Positive Body Language

Body language is a critical component of communication, particularly for older adults who may struggle with verbal communication. Caregivers should maintain eye contact, nod to show understanding, smile, and adopt an open posture. These non-verbal cues help convey warmth and attentiveness (Wanko Keutchafo et al., 2022).

3. Personalization of Communication



Each older adult is unique, with different life experiences, preferences, and communication needs. Caregivers should tailor their communication style to suit the individual, taking into account factors such as hearing impairments, preferred language, and cognitive abilities. Using a person-centred approach can help older adults feel respected and understood (Ebrahimi et al., 2021; Sundler et al., 2019).

4. Patience and Calmness

Older adults may take longer to process information or respond to questions due to cognitive changes or health conditions. Caregivers should remain patient, avoid rushing conversations, and give older adults ample time to express themselves. Calmness in speech and behavior helps create a low-stress environment conducive to meaningful communication.

5. Validation and Acknowledgment

Acknowledging the feelings and concerns of older adults is crucial for building trust. Caregivers should validate their emotions by expressing empathy and understanding, even if they do not fully agree with their perspective. Simple statements like, "I understand this is difficult for you" or "I can see why you're upset" can make older adults feel heard and respected.

5. Effective communication skills – Lessons learned from older people with dementia

There are successful strategies that can improve communication and enhance the caregiving experience with older people, including those with dementia or other cognitive impairments (Alsawy et al., 2019; Bender et al., 2022).

1. Simplification of Language

Caregivers should use simple, straightforward language when communicating with older people, especially those who have dementia. Complex sentences, jargon, and abstract ideas should be avoided. Instead, short, clear statements or questions that focus on one idea at a time are more effective, minimizing, however, the use of elderspeak (McLaughlin, 2020).



2. Use of Repetition and Reminders

Older adults with dementia may struggle with memory retention. Caregivers can help by repeating important information and providing gentle reminders. Visual cues, such as written notes or pictures, can also aid understanding (Nussbaum et al., 2000).

3. Maintaining Routine and Familiarity

Routines and familiarity provide comfort and security for older adults. When communicating, caregivers should stick to familiar topics, use consistent phrasing, and engage in daily routines to help older adults, especially those with dementia, feel more at ease and reduce confusion.

4. Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement can encourage cooperation and engagement in older adults with dementia. Caregivers should offer praise and encouragement when the individual expresses themselves or participates in conversation. Acknowledging their efforts, even in small ways, reinforces positive behaviour.

5. Validation Therapy

Validation therapy is an approach where caregivers validate the emotions of older adults with dementia rather than correcting or contradicting their reality. For example, in a case when an older adult insists that they are waiting for a deceased family member, caregivers should focus on their feelings and acknowledge them without attempting to argue or provide factual correction. This method reduces anxiety and promotes a sense of security (Brown et al., 2020).



6. Intercultural communication with older adults

Intercultural communication between caregivers and older adults can be challenging due to differences in:

cultural values

norms

**communication
styles**

To provide respectful, empathetic, and effective care, caregivers must understand how these factors influence interactions.

- For instance, collectivist cultures (e.g., East Asian, Middle Eastern) emphasize respect for elders and family hierarchy, often requiring formal communication. In contrast, individualist cultures (e.g., North American, Western European) prioritize personal autonomy, encouraging more casual communication and decision-making.
- Non-verbal communication also varies across cultures. High-context cultures (e.g., Japan, China) rely on subtle cues and non-verbal signals, while low-context cultures (e.g., U.S., Germany) prefer direct and clear communication. Additionally, physical proximity, gestures, and eye contact can hold different meanings. For example, maintaining eye contact is valued in Western cultures, but it may be considered confrontational in some Asian or Middle Eastern cultures. Caregivers must be mindful of these nuances to avoid miscommunication and build trust.
- Cultural perceptions of health, aging, and family involvement in decision-making impact communication. In collectivist societies, family members may play a significant role in healthcare decisions, while individualist cultures may focus on older adult's autonomy. Caregivers need to navigate these dynamics, respecting the preferences of both the older adult and their family, while adapting to cultural expectations.



7. Practical section: Exercises and role-plays

Effective communication with older adults is a skill that can be developed through practice and training. Here are some practical exercises and tools that caregivers can use to improve their communication skills:

7.1 Communication Exercises

Active Listening Drills: In pairs, one person speaks for two minutes about a topic while the other listens without interrupting. The listener then summarizes what was said, focusing on understanding and empathy.

Empathy Exercises: Participants describe a challenging situation from the perspective of an older adult, considering their emotional and physical experiences. This helps develop empathetic responses.

7.2 Role-Plays

Caregivers can role-play common caregiving scenarios, such as assisting with daily activities, handling a difficult conversation, or managing an emotional outburst. By simulating these situations, caregivers can practice effective communication techniques, such as active listening, non-verbal and non-violent communication.

7.3 Simulation Activities

Simulations can immerse participants in real-life scenarios to practice communication strategies. You can use pre-recorded videos or interactive digital tools to create engaging experiences.

Aging Simulation Experience

Create a simulation where caregivers experience what it's like to communicate with sensory impairments. Use tools that simulate:

- **Hearing loss:** Have participants wear noise-cancelling headphones to simulate moderate to severe hearing impairment.



- Vision loss: Provide goggles that simulate common vision issues like cataracts or macular degeneration.
- Cognitive challenges: Present participants with tasks while simulating cognitive issues like memory loss or confusion to help them understand how frustrating communication can be for older adults.

7.4 Digital Resources

Here are video resources that demonstrate some best practices in caregiver-patient communication:

- Empathy, Compassion & Compassion Fatigue – Patient Centered Care Best Practice
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9YkN_VXW-0
A comprehensive look at how caregivers can balance empathy and compassion while managing potential burnout, crucial for sustaining long-term effective caregiving.
- Negative words frequently used in healthcare - Patient Centered Care Best Practice
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E47oHb8pL4s>
This video reviews the most used word by clinicians that are linked to negative perceptions by patients and families
- Showing Acceptance, Sensitivity, and Empathy to Build a Patient Relationship
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99sMEzQATTs>
This resource covers techniques for building strong relationships with patients by demonstrating sensitivity, empathy, and acceptance in communication.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, effective communication with older adults is essential for promoting their well-being, dignity, and quality of life. By practicing empathy, respect, and non-violent communication, caregivers can build meaningful connections, overcome communication barriers, and enhance the overall caregiving experience. Prioritizing clear, compassionate communication fosters trust and supports active aging.



9. Further educational material

9.1 Online Resources

- Alzheimer's Society Communication Tips. Available online at www.alz.org.
- World Health Organization – Active Aging and Communication. Available at www.who.int.
- Relajo-Howell, D. (2022, July 15). Why communication is so important for older adults. *Psychreg*. <https://www.psychreg.org/why-communication-important-older-adults/>
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- Communicating With Older Adults. An Evidence-Based Review of What Really Works. The Gerontological Society of America, 2012.
- https://www.lasell.edu/Documents/talk-of-ages/GSA_Communicating-with-Older-Adults-low-Final.pdf

9.2 Videos and Tutorials

- TED Talk: " The next revolution in health care? Empathy "

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