

**To Our Clients and Friends...**

For seven years, since its inception, Ready Hands has been blessed with steady growth—even despite the poor economic picture that emerged so gloomily in 2008. We think that one reason is our continued personal involvement with our clients and the responsibility we feel to be sure that they receive high-caliber care. And as always, we must thank the clients and senior-serving professionals who have supported Ready Hands over the years.

In this issue, we highlight the topic of communication. Following is an article about the special challenges of communicating effectively with those who suffer from dementia. On page two, we present a few tips for making the most out of non-verbal communication, which is even more important than the words we speak. We hope you find this information useful.

*Granger Benson, M.D.*

*Sue Benson, R.N.*

**Optimizing Communication in Dementia**

Communication with others is so essential to our lives that it's hard to imagine existence without it. Yet even among adults with no cognitive impairment, achieving true understanding can be a challenge. When communicating with someone who has dementia, the challenge is much greater.

The language skills of individuals with dementia may be adversely affected in many ways. They may have difficulty finding words, substitute the wrong word or use "nonsense words" (neologisms). They can forget the names of objects or the names of friends and relatives. People with dementia often confuse generations, mistaking their wife for their mother, for example. They can eventually lose all ability to communicate verbally. Using non-verbal behaviors, in fact, is critical to effective communication in dementia (see page two for some tips on non-verbal communication).

Dementia sufferers may be trying to grapple with a world that no longer makes sense to them because their brains are interpreting information incorrectly. Misunderstandings are commonplace. Difficulties with communication can be upsetting and frustrating for the person with dementia and for those around them, and they contribute to the difficult behaviors that are often seen in dementia. Fortunately there are many ways to increase understanding.

**Listen Well**

The first duty of a good communicator is to listen. Listen carefully, and give plenty of encouragement. If the person with dementia



has trouble finding words, ask him or her to explain in a different way. Take note of clues. Use what you know about the speaker to help interpret his or her meaning. Self-expression is vital to our well-being, so allow the person to talk without interruption. You may need to suggest words at times, but avoid the tendency to finish the speaker's sentences. Instead, check for understanding by paraphrasing. Let the speaker express feelings without trying to "jolly" him or her along. Giving the speaker the gift of your time to listen closely shows that you care and can itself be therapeutic.

**Attracting and Keeping Attention**

It is important to be sure you have a person's attention before you start to communicate. Make sure he or she can see clearly; turn up the light if necessary. Make eye contact. Avoid distractions such as radio, TV or other competing conversations. Make sure eyeglasses and hearing aides are in place, if applicable. Sometimes pain, medication side effects or other treatable medical situations can inter-

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fere with communication, so check with a physician about such issues if suspected.

## Body Language

Be calm and still while you communicate. This shows that you are giving your full attention, and that you have time for the person. Never stand over someone to communicate; it can feel intimidating. Instead, drop below the person's eye level. This will help him or her feel more in control of the situation. Standing too close can also feel intimidating, so always respect personal space. If words fail the person, pick up cues from his or her body language. Facial expressions, movements and body postures can give you clear signals about how they are feeling. Finally, don't underestimate the reassurance that you can give by patting the person's hand or putting your arm around them, if it feels right.

## Be Clear and Keep it Simple

The ability to initiate conversation declines as dementia progresses, so you will have to take more initiative. Speak clearly and calmly; avoid sharp or shrill tones, as this may be distressing to the dementia sufferer even if your words are not fully understood. Use simple, short sentences.

## TIPS FOR IMPROVING NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

At Ready Hands, we are often asked by clients to be sure that the aides we assign "speak good English." But interestingly, despite an accent and some imperfect grammar, some aides for whom English is a second language achieve better communication than others whose English is more polished. The reason, of course, is that effective communication depends more on how something is said than the actual words one uses. Non-verbal behavior makes all the difference in achieving real understanding between people. Here are five tips for optimizing non-verbal communication:

- ◆ Make eye contact. Eye contact helps regulate the flow of information and it signals interest in others. Furthermore, eye contact increases the credibility of the speaker.
- ◆ Smile. Smiling conveys warmth, friendliness, happiness and affiliation. If you smile frequently, you will be perceived as caring and approachable.
- ◆ Gesture while speaking, to avoid appearing stiff and disinterested. Head nods, for example, indicate listening and communicate that you understand.
- ◆ Use positive body position and posture. Face the person you are speaking to. Lean slightly forward to convey that you are engaged and interested.
- ◆ Vary the tone, pitch, rhythm, inflection and volume of your voice. Speaking in a monotone loses a listener's attention more quickly.

Allow plenty of time for the person to process information. Ask direct questions, preferably one at a time, phrased in a way that allows for a "yes" or "no" answer. Avoid open-ended questions. Don't give multi-part directions or plans; instead, break down tasks into simple steps. Try not to ask the person to make complicated decisions. If the person is having trouble understanding, try to find other ways to say what you mean, rather than just repeating the same thing.

## Be Respectful

As dementia progresses, fact and fantasy can become confused. If the person says something you know isn't true, try to find ways around the situation rather than responding with a flat contradiction. If the person says "We must leave now - Mother is waiting for me", you might reply, "Your mother used to wait for you, didn't she?"

Always avoid making the person with dementia feel foolish in front of other people. Don't talk down or adopt a patronizing tone. Try to include the person in conversations with others, adjusting your communication style if needed. Socialization can help a person with dementia to preserve his or her fragile sense of identity. It also reduces feelings of exclusion and isolation.

## Cynthia Akrong Receives Quarterly Recognition Award



Cynthia Akrong with her client

Ready Hands is pleased to present our Recognition Award to Cynthia Akrong. Cynthia has become "part of the family" for her live-in client, with whom she has worked since starting at Ready Hands in October 2007.

Cynthia exemplifies all the qualities which we prize in our employees. She is warm and caring in her manner. She takes initiative to accomplish her duties without reminders. She "goes the extra mile" to be sure her client is well taken care of. She is intelligent and uses good judgment.

Ready Hands is fortunate to have such a wonderful employee. It is through great employees like Cynthia that we advance our reputation as a superior provider of home care in our region.

Therefore, it is with gratitude for a job well done that we say, from the bottom of our hearts,

**Thank You, Cynthia!**