

VISION AND HEARING INTERVENTIONS

Suggestions for Helping a Person by Addressing Their Cognitive Abilities

Shelly Weaverdyck

TO KEEP IN MIND

1. A person at any age may have difficulty seeing and hearing. Most **older adults**, however, will likely have significant vision and hearing changes. **Colors** are often distorted and **details** or **fine print** hard to read. Words like **food, meal, water, wash, bath, shower, and dressed** are often **hard to hear**.
2. With normal aging it is usually the **high pitched** sounds in a word that are especially hard to hear. So it is particularly important to **deepen** your voice, speak more **clearly** by enunciating each sound, speak more **slowly**, and yet speak with a **normal intonation and rhythm**.
3. Because these sensory changes have been occurring gradually over many years in most older adults, the **brain** has likely been able to **compensate** for the reduced ability to see and hear.
4. When a disorder causes the brain to change, however, it can no longer compensate as easily for the sensory changes. The brain cannot as easily figure out what this person is trying to see and hear. So, it is even more important for you to accommodate the sensory changes in the **environment** and in **your communication** with this person.

GENERAL VISION AND HEARING INTERVENTIONS

5. Provide information through **more than one sense** (for example, show the shirt as well as say “It is time to get dressed”).
6. Use **gestures** and provide **multiple cues** (for example, show the toothbrush and toothpaste to indicate it is time to brush teeth).
7. Provide **advance information** for anticipation when anticipation doesn’t produce anxiety (for example, say “I will help you eat lunch in ten minutes”).
8. Tailor your interaction to the **individual person**. Know what helps them see and hear more easily, or if **one eye** or **ear** works better than the other.
9. **Watch this person** so you can “read” them and see their reaction. Then you can **modify** the **environment** or **how you are interacting** with them to make it easier for them.
10. Get this person’s **attention** before speaking or showing them something (for example, touch them if they are comfortable being touched).
11. Give this person **more time**. Give them time to shift their attention to you and to absorb what you are saying or showing them.
12. **Move as little as possible** and **slowly** and deliberately, **yet naturally**. Make sure this person can see and hear you as you move or an object as it is moved.
13. **Avoid being so overwhelmed by their cognitive changes that you forget to address their sensory changes**.
14. Address the **fatigue** that frequently occurs when this person is trying to hear and see what is going on. Allow for rest or breaks in a task.
15. **Avoid large groups** of people and **congested environments**.
16. **Ask** this person if they can see and hear ok at the moment, or if they are tired.

17. Be generous and patient. **Avoid assuming that if they hear or see you one time, they will see or hear you another time.** Sometimes subtle noises that you didn't notice occur, like a heater coming on, that obscure your voice one time and not the next. Rarely does a person "hear only what they want to hear".

VISION

18. **Increase lighting.**
19. Use **diffuse** lighting to remove shadows and glare (for example, have multiple light sources throughout the space).
20. Use bright primary colors on objects important for this person to see.
21. Use **light/dark contrast** to highlight an object (for example, a white cup against a dark shirt when offering tea, or a dark chair against a light floor, a dark grab bar against a light wall).
22. Position the **light source behind the person** with the decreased vision, rather than behind yourself (for example, avoid standing in front of a window or a lamp). This will help them see you and your face more easily.
23. **Look at this person** when talking to them. **Make sure they can see your face and mouth.**
24. Bring your face or an object **close enough** to this person so they can see you or the object well.
25. Present yourself and all objects to this person in the **spot where they see best.** There may be "blind spots" in their vision. Avoid standing, sitting, or holding the object too far away, too close, too high, too low, too far to the left or too far to the right.
26. **Clean** this person's **glasses.**
27. Make sure the prescription for their glasses is accurate and current.
28. Use large print reading material and make sure objects and details of objects are **large enough.**
29. **Avoid changes** in the environment or where objects are kept.
30. **Hand** this person **an object** rather than simply pointing to it.
31. **Tell** them what an object is (for example, the food on their plate).
32. **Soften** the environment, so if they bump into something, they are less likely to get hurt (for example, round the corners of the coffee table).
33. **Avoid busy patterns or repetitive patterns** like plaids, especially in chairs, couches, floors, tablecloths, and your shirt.

HEARING

34. **Eliminate background noise** (for example, avoid rustling paper, turn off the radio, close the door, or wait to talk until the noise stops).
35. **Lower the pitch** of your voice and speak more **slowly** and **clearly**, but with a natural rhythm or cadence.
36. Adjust their **hearing aids** to make sure they work well. (For example, the batteries are charged, and the hearing aid is positioned in the ear properly and comfortably).
37. Make sure the prescription for their hearing aids is accurate and current.
38. Have only **one person talk at a time**, or interact with this person, even when there are others in the room or others assisting with a task.
39. **Face** this person when talking. Move as little as possible. Make sure they can see your face and lips.
40. On the radio or music equipment, **increase the treble** and **decrease the bass.**
41. Use **headphones** if this person is comfortable with them.
42. Use **slow flashing lights** to replace or call attention to sounds, such as the doorbell.
43. **Repeat** yourself as often as necessary until they understand you. Avoid saying "Never mind".