

TOUCH

Suggestions for Touching a Person with Cognitive Impairment

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TO KEEP IN MIND

1. All touch is a form of **communication**, even when it is careless or unintentional.
2. This person may be **very sensitive** to touch. Your touch might send sensations such as “pins and needles”, “bugs crawling”, or “tickling” up and down their skin, or be painful. A soft touch might feel like a hit or like intense heat or cold.
3. This person **may not know** you are touching a part of their body. For example, they may not feel your touch, may think you’re touching a different part of their body, or they may not recognize the body part you are touching as theirs so they think you are touching someone else.
4. The length of time there is contact and the movement of your touch may result in a **change** in the level of sensitivity. For example, their sensitivity to your touch may decrease or increase as your hand rests on their arm for a period of five minutes. When you move your hand or stroke their arm, their sensitivity may also change.
5. The ability to feel touch, or the level and type of sensitivity to touch may be **unpredictable**. Each part of this person’s body or each side of this person’s body may have a different level or type of sensitivity to touch, and may change from one moment to next.

INTERVENTION SUGGESTIONS

GENERAL

6. Use touch to communicate **comfort and reassurance** and to help calm this person.
7. Touch as appropriate, to help this person **understand** what you are saying or doing.
8. Touch this person’s **body part** when talking about the body part, for example, when asking them to lift an arm or when asking if the arm hurts.
9. Use touch to get and keep this person’s **attention**. For example, touch their arm or hand.
10. Touch this person to **feel their reaction** to what you say or do, for example to feel stiffening or an increased tension in a body part.
11. Watch this person’s face and body, and listen to what they say, to discern how they **respond** to your touch. For example, watch for stiffening, withdrawal, going very still, a frown, a shifting of their eye gaze, or eye blinking, closing, or tears to see if they are very sensitive to touch. If there is no reaction, try to discern if they are actually feeling your touch, by asking or stroking.
12. **Assess** various parts of this person’s body **frequently** to note changes in their sensitivity to touch.

IF VERY SENSITIVE TO TOUCH

13. If they are very sensitive to touch, then **avoid touching** or try touching using the palm of your hand with gentle sustained firmness.
14. **Ask permission** or tell this person before touching, so they can prepare emotionally and reduce the physical discomfort. Avoid surprising them.
15. Go **slowly** enough to allow this person time to prepare for your touch.

16. Maintain **eye contact** when touching this person. Talk about something to distract them.
17. Touch parts of the body that aren't as sensitive first, or the peripheral parts of their body before stroking toward their torso, to help them get used to being touched at this time.
18. Minimize the number of times your hand leaves and returns to their body, since they may have difficulty adjusting to the initiation of touch.
19. Use the **palm** of your hand rather than fingers to touch and stroke, to minimize the number of contact points. For example, to grasp this person's arm, settle your palm onto their arm, then keep your fingers together and gently roll your fingers onto more of the arm to reduce the discomfort of initiating touch to new parts of skin.
20. Use **gentle firm pressure** when touching, if light touch seems to be uncomfortable. Slowly increase pressure until the person feels comfortable. Maintain this same amount of pressure throughout the time you are touching. Avoid applying so much pressure that your touch hurts.
21. Avoid stroking back and forth. Move your hand along their skin only when necessary, or to avoid removal of your hand and reinitiation of contact.
22. Touch through a **barrier**, such as a shirt sleeve or towel. For example, in the shower, cover the shower nozzle with a wash cloth or put a towel over their skin to avoid direct contact of the water spray with their skin. When lifting a person's arm, for example, drape a soft towel between your hand and their arm first.
23. Avoid moving cloth, water, or a surface over their skin if that is uncomfortable. For example, pat a person's wet arm with the towel rather than rubbing it, encourage this person to take a bath rather than a shower, avoid fans or wind that might blow a person's sleeve over the skin on their arm.
24. Remove or **loosen clothing** (including seams, and tight fitting or scratchy material) or surfaces that are rough or uncomfortable against their skin. For example, wear socks inside out or put a sheet between a blanket and a person's skin.
25. **Watch** this person's face and body constantly, and listen to what they say to discern how sensitive or uncomfortable a body part is with touch at this moment.
26. **Try again later** if they are too sensitive to touch now.

IF LESS AWARE OF TOUCH

27. If they have difficulty feeling your touch, **draw their attention** to your touch by telling them ahead of time and while you are touching.
28. Go **slowly** enough to allow this person time to prepare for your touch.
29. Maintain **eye contact** when touching this person. Talk about your touch to keep them aware of it.
30. Touch the parts of their body where they recognize touch first, then stroke toward other body parts. Or touch the torso or shoulder before stroking toward the peripheral parts of their body, to help them get used to being touched at this time.
31. Use **gentle firm pressure** when touching, if light touch seems to be unrecognizable. Touch lightly first, then slowly increase pressure until the person recognizes your touch. Maintain this same amount of pressure throughout the time you are touching. Avoid applying so much pressure that your touch hurts or mars the skin.
32. **Stroke** your hand back and forth to focus attention on your touch. Stroke gently and carefully since their skin may be dry or fragile and tear easily. Examine the skin where you are stroking.
33. **Check their entire body** to make sure there aren't sores or painful or uncomfortable areas that are unnoticed by this person. Note especially the peripheral or distal areas such as fingers and toes.
34. **Watch** this person's face and body constantly, and listen to what they say to discern how sensitive a body part is with touch at this moment.
35. **Try again later** if they are unaware of touch now.