



## Understanding Communication: Questions to Ask

Here are some questions to ask yourself about communication to better understand how well your interactions with a person support the person's cognitive abilities. These questions are based on brain functioning and specific cognitive skills. However, you do not need to know anything about the brain or cognition to ask them. The questions are organized under general intervention concepts that address needs a person might frequently experience in most interactions.

A "Yes" answer suggests your interactions are currently effective in meeting this person's cognitive needs and relying on their cognitive strengths. The answers to these questions can suggest changes you can make in your communication strategies to help a person understand, respond, and feel comfortable with you. The questions are written for you to ask about yourself.

The questions assume you are the care partner (that is, caregiver) assisting this person. (So you are observing yourself while you assist.) If someone else is assisting instead, then you will observe whomever is assisting and ask yourself the questions about whomever is assisting.

More information is on the last page of this handout.

### **A. RESPECT:** Look for ways I:

- Show respect for this person, both verbally and nonverbally
  - Treat this person as an adult, both verbally and nonverbally
  - Express warmth and affection for this person (show that I care about this person), both verbally and nonverbally
1. Do I respect this person?
  2. Do I treat this person as an adult in my words and facial expressions? (For example, do I avoid calling this person "dear" when I really don't know them?)
  3. Do I offer normal adult objects and activities? (For example, do I avoid children's toys or games?)
  4. Do I avoid talking about this person in a condescending way? (For example, do I avoid saying "they are so cute together" or "she's the little lady over there"?)
  5. Do I avoid talking about this person in front of this person?
  6. Are my voice, gestures, and movements gentle and kind, even when clear or firm?

7. Do I help this person save face and avoid embarrassment? (For example, do I avoid calling attention to their mistakes? Do I discreetly correct the mistakes without them noticing?)
8. Do I avoid scolding, shaming, or bossing this person?

**B. EXPLANATION AND REASSURANCE:** Look for ways I:

- Show reassurance to this person
  - Clearly explain events, requests, and the environment to this person
1. Do I give reassurance as often as necessary, both verbally and nonverbally?
  2. Do I avoid giving this person information that would be distressing or embarrassing to them?
  3. Do I give information or make a request only when this person is emotionally calm and ready to hear me? (So they do not need to feel emotion and think about my words at the same time?)
  4. Do I give as much explanation as this person needs?
  5. Do I repeat requests or explanations as often as necessary?
  6. Are explanations short, simple and clear?
  7. Do I use few words, and short phrases and words?
  8. Do I use concrete and familiar words?
  9. Do I speak clearly and in a low pitch?
  10. Do I talk as slowly as necessary, and with pauses to allow time for processing?
  11. Do I wait to talk until there is no other noise?
  12. Do I give clear and honest answers to every question this person asks?
  13. Do I answer questions as though this is the first time they were asked?
  14. Do I avoid saying “no” and do I suggest alternatives instead?
  15. Do my questions invite opinions or “yes” and “no” responses, rather than facts or information?
  16. Do I let this person know how much time has passed and what time of day it is, when necessary?
  17. Do I tell this person when a task is done?
  18. Do I verbally prepare this person before touching any part of their body? (For example, by asking permission to touch or by telling them verbally?)
  19. Do I ask this person to move a part of their body rather than moving it myself?
  20. Do I verbally prepare this person before a part of their body moves? (For example, by asking them for permission for me to move it or by telling them before they or I move it?)
  21. Do I nonverbally prepare this person before a part of their body moves? (For example, by touching and stroking a body part before they or I move it?)

**C. BODY LANGUAGE:** Look for ways I:

- Use my body to communicate with this person
- Unintentionally communicate with my body

- Address this person's sensory and cognitive abilities by how I position and move my body
1. Do I use my body enough to communicate with this person? (For example, do I use facial expressions and hand gestures with my words to help them understand?)
  2. Is my body telling them what I want it to say? Do I avoid gestures or facial expressions that could be misinterpreted? (For example, do I raise my eyebrows rather than frown when I want to show concern?)
  3. Do my body, face, eyes, and words all match? (For example, do I avoid moving quickly and with startling movements while using soothing words and smiling?)
  4. Do I place myself so this person sees and notices me easily?
  5. Do I change positions and move my body slowly, and as little as possible?
  6. Am I at eye-level with this person? (For example, sitting when I interact with them?)
  7. Do I make and keep eye contact with them?
  8. Do I touch this person while talking, when appropriate?
  9. Do I model the task and positive behaviors? (For example, do I do the task myself so they can see me while they are also doing the task? Am I upbeat and positive?)

**D. APPROACH:** Look for ways I:

- Introduce a topic, activity, or request in a way that helps this person feel positive about it
  - Set an upbeat, cheerful, relaxed, and comfortable emotional tone
  - Prevent anxiety, uncertainty, or frustration in this person
1. Do I converse with this person and build trust before mentioning a task such as bathing or getting dressed?
  2. Do I avoid embarrassment about private activities? (For example, do I invite them to use the toilet only when we are alone?)
  3. Do I avoid telling them about the whole task, and instead mention only one step at a time when appropriate? (For example, instead of saying, "Let's take a shower", do I say "Let's walk to the bathroom"?)
  4. Do I offer options they can understand, so they can make choices?
  5. Do I suggest a refreshment or fun enticement to help them participate?
  6. Do I rhythmically sing or march to a place, when appropriate to help this person walk and participate? (For example, do I use rhythm when I walk with them to the dining room or bathroom?)
  7. Do I laugh, joke, and use humor in a concrete and emotionally supportive way?
  8. Do I stay calm no matter what is happening? (For example, even when we are being silly together, or when this person is angry or frightened?)

**E. OBSERVATION:** Look for ways I notice and recognize:

- How this person is feeling
  - How well this person is understanding
  - What this person is trying to express
  - Evidence this person is going to be frustrated, anxious, or angry
  - Evidence this person may engage in a distressing behavior
  - How to best respond to this person's feelings and behaviors
1. Do I watch this person carefully for nonverbal and verbal feedback, so I can see how they are feeling, and can anticipate or respond to frustration and anxiety?
  2. Do I watch their whole body and notice changes that suggest confusion, anxiety, or something they are trying to tell me? (For example, do I watch for tightening leg muscles, clenching fists, facial grimaces, widening or rapid eye movements, brief frowns?)
  3. Do I watch their eyes when we talk?
  4. Does this person seem comfortable and relaxed?
  5. Is this person responding positively to what I am saying or doing?
  6. Does this person seem to understand me?
  7. Do I give this person enough time to absorb what I say and then enough time to respond?
  8. Do I change my own behavior or the environment in response to this person's reactions?

**F. DISTRACTION:** Look for ways I:

- Use distraction or diversion to help this person
  - Compensate for or reduce distraction with this person
1. Do I know when distraction or diversion is helpful with this person? (For example, when they repeatedly ask to do something that is unsafe, or when they are performing a task that is easier to do when they aren't thinking about it?)
  2. When there is a distressing behavior, do I use humor and diversion instead of demands, argument, shame, or instructions to stop the behavior?
  3. Do I avoid calling this person's attention to their behavior? (For example, do I avoid comments such as "What would your mother say if she heard you talk like that"?)
  4. Do I carefully note their words and behaviors to discover the feelings behind their distressing behavior, and then respond to the feelings, rather than simply to the words or behaviors?
  5. During tasks, do I encourage them to hold or use an item while I use a similar item? (For example, a comb while I comb their hair or a wash cloth while I wash during a bath?)
  6. Do I get their attention before speaking, and keep it throughout our interaction?
  7. Do I reduce distraction, noise, and clutter around me when I am talking to them?

**G. CONSISTENCY:** Look for ways I:

- Keep my interactions the same and predictable as much as possible
  - Have only one care partner (caregiver) at a time interacting with this person
1. Does the same care partner help this person every day as much as possible?
  2. Does this person know what to expect from me?
  3. Do I use nearly the same words every time we do this task?
  4. Do I position myself in the same spot every time we do this task?
  5. Do I move my body in a similar way every time we do this task?
  6. Is there only one care partner helping this person at a time?
  7. If there are two or more care partners, is there only one care partner at a time that this person is noticing and paying attention to? (For example, are the other care partners helping from behind, staying out of sight, and not talking?)

**H. CHARACTERISTICS:** Ask myself:

- Am I the best person to be helping with this task?
  - Are there things I can change about myself to make this go more easily?
  - Are there things I cannot change and therefore must address in some way?
  - How do I feel about this person and about this task?
1. Does this person recognize me as myself and not someone else?
  2. Does this person feel comfortable with me or with whomever they think I am?
  3. Does this person trust me?
  4. Is my gender comfortable and appropriate for this person?
  5. Is this person comfortable with all of my characteristics? (For example, with my size, race, ethnicity, appearance, the sound of my voice, or the language I use?)
  6. Am I comfortable with this person right now and in general?
  7. Am I comfortable doing this task with this person? (For example, am I comfortable seeing them without clothes on or seeing them drool while eating?)
  8. Am I comfortable with their dependency?
  9. Can I avoid letting my anger or sadness about this person's behavior affect my ability to help?

**I. ORGANIZATION:** Look for ways I:

- Organize my time, the task steps, and the task items
  - Am efficient, but appear relaxed and calm to this person
  - Focus more on the person than on the task or product
1. Do I organize my time to avoid the need to rush through a task?

2. Do I plan the task steps ahead of time?
3. Do I do most of the task preparation out of sight of this person?
4. Do I stay out of this person's sight when I do those parts of the task this person is not directly involved in, and that might be confusing or distressing? (For example, do I rinse out the wash cloth or put the toothpaste on the toothbrush where this person doesn't see me?)
5. Do I move quickly and quietly when I am out of this person's sight, but more slowly on the parts of the task where this person sees me?
6. Do I focus on this person and not so much on the task or product? (For example, do I focus more on ensuring this person is comfortable and content, than I do on getting the task done successfully or quickly?)

**J. PREVENTION:** Look for ways I:

- Prevent distress, confusion, or anger, rather than simply respond to them when they occur
1. Am I nipping this person's distress or confusion in the bud, rather than letting it escalate to more challenging levels?
  2. Do I apologize or reassure immediately when I see them beginning to get angry or anxious?
  3. Do I notice subtle hesitations and try to gently coax or encourage them?

## More about these Questions

This handout lists questions you can ask yourself to discover how well your interactions with a person meet the person's cognitive needs, and how well your interactions rely on or use the person's cognitive strengths. The questions are based on specific brain functions and cognitive abilities. They focus on ways your communication strategies can make it easier or harder for a person to feel competent and comfortable and to perform tasks of daily living.

You are probably the most significant factor affecting behavior, the amount of distress and fatigue a person experiences, and how easily and successfully you can assist a person. These questions help explore why a person is distressed, having trouble performing a task, or engaging in a distressing behavior. They also suggest support strategies (interventions).

These are questions you ask yourself about yourself, NOT to ask the person you are observing. The questions assume you are assisting this person. If someone else is assisting instead, then you ask yourself the questions about whomever is assisting.

Anyone can ask these questions in any setting in any situation. They can be asked during any task or not during a task. They can be helpful to anyone with any level or type of relationship with a person. They should be asked frequently enough to address changes in the person's needs, strengths and desires.

The **“Cognitive Abilities and Support Strategies (CASS) Communication Checklist”** presents these questions in more detail and in a more formal structure in two formats: a Yes/No format and a four-point response format. It also includes additional questions.

The “**Cognitive Abilities and Support Strategies (CASS) Communication Strategies List**” presents a variety of support strategies (intervention options) for each question on the CASS Communication Checklist.

The CASS consists of four parts, each with a list of questions (a checklist) and options of support strategies (a support strategies list). The four parts are 1) Cognitive Abilities, 2) Environment, 3) Communication, and 4) Task and Daily Routines. The questions in this handout are part of the CASS Communication Checklist and the CASS Communication Support Strategies List.

The questions are meant to be asked while you are helping a person perform a task. Sometimes they might be useful with regard to general observation. The answers to these questions can help you modify your communication strategies, the environment, or the task to accommodate the person’s cognitive abilities and challenges. When you answer the questions during an interaction, you can intervene immediately and respond to subtle changes that occur minute by minute in the person’s cognitive abilities.

These questions apply to any task (for example, daily housekeeping chores, hygiene, leisure activities, a visit with a friend) in any setting.

Answers to all of these questions can help determine which support strategies might be most effective in helping a person be happier and function more independently.

**Original Sources:**

- Weaverdyck, S.E. (1990) “Neuropsychological Assessment as a Basis for Intervention in Dementia”. Chapter 3 in N. Mace (Ed.) Dementia Care: Patient, Family, and Community. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Weaverdyck, S.E. (1991) “Assessment as a Basis for Intervention” and “Intervention to Address Dementia as a Cognitive Disorder”. Chapters 12 & 13 in D. Coons (Ed.) Specialized Dementia Care Units. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.