

VISION AND HEARING INTERVENTIONS

Suggestions for Helping Someone with Cognitive Impairment

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TO KEEP IN MIND

1. A person with cognitive impairment who is older will likely have changes in their ability to see and hear. Colors are often distorted and details or fine print hard to read. Words like food, meal, bath, shower, dressed, and water are often hard to hear.
2. With normal aging and hearing, it is usually the high pitched sounds in a word that are lost. So it is particularly important to deepen the voice, speak more clearly by enunciating each sound, speak more slowly, yet speak with a normal intonation and rhythm.
3. Because these sensory changes have likely been occurring gradually over many years, the brain has been able to compensate for the reduced ability to see and hear.
4. When the brain becomes impaired it can no longer compensate as easily for the sensory changes, so it cannot as easily figure out what a person sees and hears. It is even more important, therefore, for you to accommodate the sensory changes in the environment and in how you interact with a person.

GENERAL VISION AND HEARING INTERVENTIONS

5. Provide information through more than one sense (e.g., show the dress as well as say “It is time to get dressed”).
6. Provide multiple cues (e.g., 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 (e.g., say “I will help you with your shower in ten minutes”).
8. Tailor your interaction to the individual person. Know what helps them see and hear more easily.
9. Watch a 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 a person’s attention before speaking or showing them something (e.g., touch them if they are comfortable being touched).
11. Give a person more time. Give them time to shift their attention to you and to absorb what you are saying or showing them.
12. Speak and move more slowly and deliberately, yet naturally.
13. Avoid being so overwhelmed by their cognitive changes that you forget to accommodate their sensory changes.
14. Accommodate the fatigue that frequently occurs when a 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 a 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 someone “hear only what they want to hear”.

VISION

18. Increase lighting.
19. Use diffuse lighting to remove shadows and glare (e.g., have multiple light sources throughout the space).
20. Use bright primary colors tastefully.
21. Use light/dark contrast to highlight an object (e.g., 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 (e.g., avoid standing in front of a window or a lamp).
23. Look at a person when talking to them. Make sure they can see your face.
24. Bring your face or an object close to a person so they can see you or the object well.
25. Clean a person's glasses.
26. Make sure the prescription for their glasses is accurate and current.
27. Use large print reading material.
28. Avoid changes in the environment or where objects are kept.
29. Hand a person an object rather than simply pointing to it.
30. Tell them what an object is (e.g., the food on their plate).
31. Soften the environment, so if they bump into something, they are less likely to get hurt (e.g., round the corners of the coffee table).
32. Avoid busy patterns or repetitive patterns like plaids, especially in chairs, couches, floors, tablecloths, and your shirt or blouse.

HEARING

33. Eliminate background noise (e.g., turn off the radio or close the door to make it quiet).
34. Lower the pitch of your voice.
35. Speak more slowly and clearly.
36. Speak with a natural cadence.
37. Adjust their hearing aids to make sure they work well.
38. Make sure the prescription for their hearing aids is accurate and current.
39. Have only one person talk at a time.
40. Have only one person interact with a person, even when there are others in the room or others assisting with a task.
41. Face a person when talking. Make sure they can see your face and lips.
42. On the radio or music equipment, increase the treble and decrease the bass.
43. Use headphones if they are comfortable with them.
44. Use flashing lights to replace or call attention to sounds such as the ring on the telephone, in case they don't hear them.
45. Repeat yourself as necessary until they understand you.