

# Integrated Literature Review of Communication Methods of Patients with Dementia

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## Abstract

This study reviewed systematic and meta-analysis research on the methods of communication in patients with dementia. This study aimed to identify the interventions that can improve communication between these patients and the health care professionals who care for them. The results showed that communication training programs have been developed for healthcare professionals and paraprofessionals to help them learn how to engage with patients with dementia through various communication strategies. For example, patient-centered communication strategies focus on target behaviors, encourage life-story telling, encourage activities that promote empathy toward patients' illness, and introduce ways of engagement that can overcome the obstacle of patients' being understood and helps them accept their condition and who they are. Additionally, through these communication training programs, healthcare professionals can change their own characteristics, values, beliefs, attitudes, and skills for communicating with patients with dementia. Thus, they are more likely to listen to their patients' subjective experiences and feelings and are able to develop the skills to help patients cope with difficult issues in their daily lives. The authors recommend that healthcare professionals should record their communication with patients with dementia on audio tape or video. Subsequently, qualitative studies of the recorded data should be conducted to identify the verbal and nonverbal language used. Dementia experts can then analyze these qualitative study results and encourage healthcare professionals to reflect on the clinical process of communication. In turn, healthcare professionals can modify their ways of engagement, behaviors, and thoughts toward dementia care. In the long run, communication training programs will enable the communication gap between healthcare professionals and patients with dementia to become smaller. Consequently, they might understand each other more effectively. This more effective understanding might reduce the behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia of patients with dementia and improve their quality of life.

**Keywords:** Communication; Dementia; Patients

## Introduction

Because of increasing aging population worldwide, mild cognitive impairment (MCI), which represents the decreased cognitive function of elderly people and is the stage between the normal cognitive decline common in aging adults and the more severe cognitive decline in patients with dementia, has become a critical public health problem [1]. The incidence rates of MCI with memory loss and MCI without memory loss are 51% and 76.8%, respectively; particularly, elderly people with a low education level and those with hypertension have a high risk. A systematic review of nine studies showed that the prevalence of MCI in elderly people in China is 12.7%; similarly, a review of 22 studies also found a high risk of MCI in elderly people with a low education level [1-2]. When elderly people with MCI experience gradual reduction in their cognitive functions that develops into dementia, communication becomes difficult for them; therefore, nurses have proposed that there is an urgent need to enhance the communication ability of patients with dementia [3].

Traynor [4] systematically reviewed dementia research and identified effective communication as one of top 10 elements for nursing care. Furthermore, D'Agostino [5] reviewed 32 unique intervention studies involving communication training for patients and reported that effective communication training can actively improve patients' participation in healthcare interventions. Eggenberger [6] also identified that communication training, including didactic methods, such as the lectures, hands-on training, group discussions, and role-play, for professional and family caregivers can improve the quality of life and well-being of patients with dementia and can enhance positive interactions in various care settings.

## Purpose of the Study

This study reviewed the systematic and meta-analysis research on

the communication methods of patients with dementia. This study aimed to identify the interventions that improve can communication between these patients and the health care professionals who care for them.

## Literature Review

Brownie, Horstmanshof, and Garbutt [7] emphasized that the key elements for the successful relocation of elderly people to a long-term care facility are to preserve their autonomy; maintain their social interactions and relationships; and provide a chance for them to express their feelings, life experiences, and the reasons behind the decision to relocate to such a facility. Therefore, effective communication between elderly people and healthcare professionals is crucial for ensuring the successful relocation of elderly people prepared to be transferred to long-term care facilities. Additionally, De Sao Jose et al. [8] systematically reviewed qualitative articles on the perceived social care of elderly people with dementia that were published between 1990 and 2004 and identified six themes: the challenges of asking for care, ambivalence, the inability make decisions about their own care, loss of multiple functions, and strategies to deal with the loss, and the elements of quality care. Moreover, Stanyon et al. [9] interviewed 16 healthcare

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professionals who interact with patients with dementia on a daily basis and identified four themes as the characteristics of healthcare professionals: the physical environment where the care is administered, organizational factors, and communication strategies.

The aforementioned problems are all related to issues in communication between healthcare professionals and the elderly patients with dementia. The following training programs or strategies related to communication between healthcare professionals and patients with dementia are introduced. Machiels et al. [10] performed a systematic review of the literature related to interventions focused on communication between nurses and patients with dementia during daily nursing care. The results identified communication training programs for nurses that broadly differed in their frequency, duration, content, and these programs used diverse communication outcome measures for verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The majority of studies have indicated the communication training programs result in positive effects. Additionally, to guide evidence-based practice, Laver et al. [11] reported the effective interventions for improving positive communication between the patients with dementia and their care givers, including the caregivers' education, skills training, and engagement in meaningful occupations.

Moreover, Small et al. [12] identified 10 frequently used communication strategies for caregivers who interact with patients with dementia. Of these strategies, only two strategies of the eliminated distraction and used the recreational materials, such as books, pictures, magazines, and games, could improve the caregivers' communication with their patients significantly after they received training with these strategies [13]. Furthermore, Mansah et al. [14] conducted a qualitative and exploratory study by using dementia care mapping and feedback from nursing assistants. They identified empathetic communication as one of three themes that, when applied, is specifically useful for patients with dementia who are aggressive, agitated, or anxious.

In addition to the aforementioned strategies, Machiels et al. [3] proposed that changing behavior can improve communication between nurses and patients with dementia; this change can be enabled by the identification of target behaviors, and the qualities that make someone as a good facilitator, but barriers to communication. The results indicated that healthcare professionals used the person-centered and nonverbal communication, such as eye contact, pictograms, objects, and touch, as the optimal methods. The nursing staff's knowledge, awareness, and skills; the efficiency with which the care team functions as a social influence and acts as the facilitators of communication between nurses and patients with dementia; and family members' expectations also had an effect on the quality of communication.

Regarding patient-centered communication, Von Kutzleben et al. [15] systematically reviewed the subjective experiences of patients with dementia and identified their needs and demands as follows: self-identity, acceptance of the illness, being cared for, not being stigmatized, maintaining normalcy, and the availability of support resources. Based on those findings, effective communication between healthcare professionals and patients with dementia has become even more crucial to understanding what the patients' needs are. Dawn Brooker proposed four elements of person-centered communication for patients with dementia: valuing people, individualized care, personal perspectives, and social environment (VIPS). This concept was introduced and its feasibility of enhancing person-centered communication between paraprofessional dementia caregivers and their patients was tested. VIPS training workshops reduced depersonalization, increased empathy and hope for patients with dementia, and increased the use

of particular communication strategies among caregivers [16]. Stein-Parbury et al. [17] also proposed that patient-centered intervention training can initially engage the emotions of patients with dementia and subsequently encourage the patients to tell their life stories as a method to enhance their social interaction with healthcare professionals. Again, De Vries [18] identified life-story telling as one of the most effective communication interventions that facilitate reminiscing about memories and patients' life story.

Furthermore, Dugmorea, Orrellb, and Spector [19] systematically reviewed 363 qualitative studies of psychosocial interventions for patients with dementia and selected 16 criteria to analyze the themes and results. They identified three common themes (story-telling, enabling opening and acceptance, and peer support) as a way for healthcare professionals to deliver interventions to improve their communication with patients. These workshops are also designed to change the characteristics, attitudes, and beliefs of caregivers. Finally, Soderlund et al. [20] conducted videotaped interviews with four nurses and patients with dementia by applying the validation method of facilitating communication skills, such as accepting their real experiences with verbal and nonverbal responsive behaviors through empathetic and confirming strategies. Their results identified four categories of patients: not interested or inability to respond to the questions, talking on more than one topic, focusing on their thoughts in their own mind, and speaking more freely when concentrating on their own thoughts.

## Discussion

After reviewing systematic or meta-analysis research on the communication methods of patients with dementia, the authors found that communication training programs have been developed for healthcare professionals and paraprofessionals to help them learn how to engage with patients with dementia through various communication strategies. For example, patient-centered communication strategies focus on target behaviors, encourage life-story telling, encourage activities that promote empathy toward patients' illness, and introduce ways of engagement that can overcome the obstacle of patients' being understood and helps them accept their condition and who they are.

Through the communication training programs, the healthcare professionals can change their own characteristics, values, beliefs, attitudes, and skills for communicating with patients with dementia. Thus, they are more likely to listen to their patients' subjective experiences and feelings and help them to cope with difficult issues in their daily lives.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

The authors recommend that healthcare professionals should communicate with patients with dementia by using the communication strategies identified through the literature review, such as applying the VIPS model of valuing, individualized, perspective, socialized process into dementia care; developing the communication principles of being patient-centered and focused on target behaviors, life-story telling, encouraging activities that promote empathy toward patients' illness; and using the skills of listening, empathy, touching, and visualized materials to gain insight into the inner world of patients with dementia. Then, healthcare professionals can identify patients' real needs and demands while referring to a background rationale.

Additionally, the authors recommend that healthcare professionals should record their communication with patients with dementia on audio tape or video. Subsequently, qualitative studies of the recorded

data should be conducted to identify the verbal and nonverbal language used. Dementia experts can then analyze the qualitative study results and encourage healthcare professionals to reflect on the clinical process of communication. In turn, healthcare professionals can modify their ways of engagement, behaviors, and thoughts toward dementia care.

In the long run, communication training programs will enable the communication gap between healthcare professionals and patients with dementia to become smaller. Consequently, they might understand each other more effectively. This more effective understanding might reduce the behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia of patients with dementia and improve their quality of life.

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