



Mindful Conversations: Using Mindfulness in Talking with Aging Loved Ones

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Have you ever been talking to someone and your mind kept wandering? Or how about when you could tell the other person was not listening to you? “Conversing” is not only about being present (whether physically or through technology), but also paying attention to what the other person is saying. This Fact Sheet provides some strategies and tips on how to fully engage in conversations with aging family members, as well as friends, coworkers and anyone else with whom you come in contact.

How Does Communication Work?

Communication is the exchange of information between two or more people – whether by writing, speaking or body language. No matter how you decide to communicate, there are general steps that you follow:

1. One person creates the message to be sent – they are known as the sender
2. The sender chooses how the message will be sent either verbally or written (e.g., text messages, emails, letters, etc.)
3. The message is sent to the person(s) for whom it is intended – they are known as the receiver.
4. The receiver listens to or reads the message and replies to the sender. Just like the sender, the receiver chooses how their reply will be sent.

This is a pretty straight forward process, but why does communication sometimes fail? How many times have you been talking to someone and realized you were not paying attention to what they were saying because you were thinking about something else? Something interrupted the process – known as noise. Now, noise is not just background sounds that make it hard to hear what someone is saying. Noise is anything that makes it harder to understand the message. This can be background sounds, your emotional state when communicating, texting a loved one instead of having the conversation in person, your tone of voice or body language that throws off the meaning (e.g., crossed arms). You cannot completely avoid noise, but you can help reduce the impact that it has on your conversations. One way to reduce the impact of noise is through mindfulness.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the act of self-awareness in any given moment. This means that you pause in the middle of any situation to pay attention to how you feel, what is going on around you and the entire situation (the overall picture). One important part of mindfulness is that you do not try to control or judge the

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situation. Do not try to steer the conversation towards what you want to talk about or label a situation negatively. Mindfulness is *focused on responding to a situation instead of reacting to it.*

Reacting and **responding** may sound like the same thing, but they actually have very different meanings. Reactions are instinctual – they stem from our subconscious mind. You do not filter what you are saying in these moments. Responses are more thoughtful. You spend more time exploring how our words might affect a situation – weighing the pros and cons. Responding instead of reacting includes keeping better control of your emotions, tone of voice and can also help you control body language.

Steps for Mindful Conversations

So how do you incorporate mindfulness into our conversations? There are three easy steps:

1. **Listening:** You may have heard of “active listening” – actually listening to what the other person is saying instead of thinking about your response. This also includes restating what the other person said. For example, your loved one is telling you that they are angry with other family members for not letting them drive to town to pick up groceries. Before going on, make sure you are accurately addressing his concerns, “I hear you are angry with some family members because they do not want you to drive anymore.” Restating your loved one’s feelings helps both of you make sure the same topics are being discussed. Now, mindful listening is like active listening because you focus on what the other person is saying, but there is a bit more to it. Most of us have been guilty of listening to someone with “half an ear” because you immediately start to think of our response instead of fully hearing what the other said. Add mindfulness to your active listening techniques. Mindful listening requires you to pause and really focus on what the other person is saying. Then think about what the person said and how they feel before you think about your response. In other words, there is an added step. Before you restate what they said, really think about what they said, their emotions behind what was said, and then think about how you should respond.
2. **Nonverbal Cues:** Communication is not just about what is being said, but how it is said and what the rest of the body is doing. Only 7% of communication is actually spoken, the other 93% is everything else – known as nonverbal

communication. This includes body language and tone of voice.

- a. Body language is everything your body is saying while you are speaking or not speaking. This includes facial expressions, posture, gestures, eye contact and how close or far you are from that person. Be aware of signals you are sending with your body while speaking. Are your arms crossed? Are you rolling your eyes as the other person is speaking? The signals you send can negatively impact the conversation because the other person may not feel like they are being heard. This is especially important in a difficult discussion, such as concerns about your aging parent's driving or starting the conversation about care later in life. These are hard conversations to have because getting older is typically linked with losing independence. No one wants to lose their independence. As your loved one is talking about their concerns or how they feel, it is important to be supportive of them expressing those concerns and feelings. You want to send positive, or at least neutral, nonverbal messages, so try to keep a relaxed posture, keep eye contact and try not to frown if you do not agree with their point of view.
- b. Your tone of voice and how you speak is crucial. Be aware of how loudly you are speaking or the pitch of your voice. Use your normal speaking voice. If you find yourself speaking louder, ask, "Am I speaking loudly because of background noise or because I am upset?" When having important conversations, be thoughtful in choosing the location. Do not have a private conversation in a public place. Find a quiet place with no background noise. Speak in a manner in which you would like to be spoken. Try not to speak harshly, especially when they say something you do not want to hear. It is okay to take a moment and walk away from the conversation to calm down. Go into the next room or outside until you calm down – then resume the conversation.

3. **Speaking:** When speaking with someone, consider the words you use. Words have power – they can impact how other people feel or act. The purpose of a mindful conversation is to not hurt others. Let's consider the following example. When talking to an aging loved one, would you use the word feeble or frail to describe them? While both words are very similar, feeble comes off harsher than frail. Mindful speaking is important in all conversations, especially when having difficult conversations.

Communication is a two-way street. You hope that the other person is listening to what is being said. More importantly, keep an eye out for nonverbal communication. As you are talking, what are they doing? Are they repeatedly breaking eye contact? Are they clenching their fists? Their body language

lets you know how they are reacting to what is being said, so be sure to pay attention!

Things to Keep in Mind

As you practice mindful communication, keep the following things in mind:

1. Use person-first language. So often, people receive a diagnosis, whether with Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, an intellectual or developmental disability, or other diagnosis, and that person is labeled with that disease: an Alzheimer's patient, an autistic child. However, these people are still people despite the diagnosis. Person-first language just simply means putting the individual first and the diagnosis second – the individual with Alzheimer's, the child with autism, Remember, words have power!
2. You already have the ability. Many times, "self-help" solutions ask you to change something fundamental about yourself, but you already have the capacity to be present during conversations. It just takes a little practice.
3. Be fully present. You have been a part of a conversation when you were not entirely invested, so you "tuned out" parts of what was being said. How did that conversation go? Probably not well. Being fully present for a conversation means you are paying attention and are fully engaged in the moment. Before starting a conversation, check in with yourself. How are you feeling? Is there anything that is distracting you? Try some meditative breathing to calm down and clear your head so you can focus on the conversation. The following link has simple breathing exercises that you can try: <https://www.mindful.org/a-five-minute-breathing-meditation/>
4. Do not avoid difficult conversations. Life does not stop because you do not want to talk about something difficult. Mindfulness can help you navigate difficult conversations. It is okay to postpone difficult conversations to do some research and mentally prepare, but do not put them off indefinitely.

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