

Aging Communication 101

Improving Interactions with Older Adults

Good communication starts with understanding who you are talking to. Many things change as we age that can hinder interactions and strain communication. This document is intended to address these issues by providing information about changes that occur and tips to help improve interactions. Keep in mind that no two people are alike; each person has varying levels of skills and limitations. When older adults have poor interactions with others it can lead to withdrawal and avoiding social situations. Don't underestimate the importance of your communication choices when interacting with older adults and know that small changes can make a big impact.

This information was derived from a research study of older adults ages 75 and older. This fact sheet is the first of two aimed at: 1) enhancing face-to-face interactions with older adults; and 2) providing outreach strategies for targeting them.



Hearing

Hearing loss is a normal part of getting older. Older adults often rely on reading lips, facial expressions, and other cues for understanding. To compensate for hearing loss, be sure to face the person you are speaking to and avoid covering your face or looking down at a computer or device. Talking in places without competing background noise such as music can also help improve interactions.



Vision

Vision decline typically starts impacting people at around age 40. Typical issues include difficulty reading small print and seeing in low-light. Be sure to keep these changes in mind during interactions. Share print information in size 14 font or larger and use dark fonts on light backgrounds for reading ease.



Memory

As we get older, it is common to have trouble recalling details like the name of a person or place. Responses from older adults may be delayed because it takes longer to retrieve these kind of details. To compensate, practice patience and allow time for them to process and respond to questions. Talking too fast and rushing through encounters can be stressful and impede successful interactions.





Visiting

Older adults feel frustrated by rushed interactions. They reflect on times when families and neighbors visited, and they could spend time talking with their doctor. Listening to someone for as little as 90 seconds can have a positive impact on them. Older adults are more likely to feel safe and to share information more openly when they have time to talk and do not feel rushed.



Technology

Skepticism and a lack of experience with technology obstructs older adults from connecting. They may view smart phones, tablets, computers, and other electronic devices as communication barriers and conduits for fraudulent activity. During interactions, minimize device use or explain the purpose for having it on hand. Face the person you're speaking to so they can read your lips and see facial expressions.



Network Dynamics

We begin reducing the number of people we socialize as early as our thirties. Those in their 80s, however, have outlived many people they know. The dynamics of a shrinking network mean there are fewer people to talk to and learn from. Share information about health or social events with older adults either through word-of-mouth or by sharing print materials to help them find outlets to connect.



Media Use

Print materials such as home delivered newspapers and mailed newsletters are key conduits for getting information to people ages 75 and older. Older adults use computer mediated communication less than other age groups. Make extra effort to send print materials to the homes of people over age 75, whose preference is to stay connected and informed through this medium.



Local Companions

Older volunteers, neighbors, and retirees can be key social contacts and informants for other seniors over the age of 75. If you are an older adult, other people your age feel comfortable and can benefit from interacting with you and they can learn valuable information about services and support. Be sure to share information with others your age who value older, local companions.



Activity

Getting out and staying active results in more communication resources to draw information from. Civically active older adults learn about events or resources through fliers or brochures and hear opinions and information from other people they talk to. Encourage and support civic engagement and volunteerism so older adults stay plugged in and engaged with their communities.