

Communicating with the Cognitively Impaired Patient

Objectives

1. Identify signs of the cognitively impairment patient.
2. Describe the causes cognitive impairment.
3. List the signs of the cognitively impairment patient.
4. Discuss effective communication techniques for the cognitive impaired patient
5. Described ways to care for the aggressive patient.

Purpose

The purpose of this **2 continuing education** course will familiarize caregivers with an understanding on how to care for and communicate with a patient experiencing cognitive impairment. According to Family Caregiver Alliance (2015) more than 16 million people in the United States are living with cognitive impairment. Cognitive impairment can be describe as s person has trouble remembering, learning new things, concentrating, or making decisions that affect their everyday life. Cognitive impairment ranges from mild to severe. With mild impairment, people may begin to notice changes in cognitive functions, but still be able to do their everyday activities. Severe levels of impairment can lead to losing the ability to understand the meaning or importance of something and the ability to talk or write, resulting in the inability to live independently (Alzheimer 's Disease Facts and Figures, 2010).

Communication problems that steams from a cognitive impairment often result in misunderstandings that can be linked with problem behaviors and increased caregiver stress.

Although forgetfulness and recent memory loss are most often the first clinical symptoms of cognitive impairment, shortcomings in language abilities are present in the majority of cases at the earliest stages, with deterioration in both production and comprehension abilities as the disease progresses (Kempler, 1991). Additionally communication breakdowns also can result either from caregivers' use of ineffective communication strategies (Savundranayagam, and Orange, 2014). Effective communication is defined as a reciprocal interaction, involving both a speaker and a communication partner (Romski & Sevcik 1993). Therefore one having a cognitive impairment can be described as any deficit in mental functioning that makes it difficult for the impaired person to send, receive, or interpret messages or communications. A patient may have a difficult time in understanding, thinking, speaking, or even remembering.

Causes Cognitive Impairment

There is no one single condition, illness, or disease that causes cognitive impairment, and it can affect any age group (Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures, 2010). However there are different reasons for one having a cognitive impairment. However one thing that is clear individuals with cognitive impairments have some degree of illness, accident, or a disease that has permanently damaged the parts of the brain that control the ability to think, concentrate, and reason. . Alzheimer's disease and other dementias in addition to conditions such as stroke, traumatic brain injury, and developmental disabilities, can cause cognitive impairment. These cognitive impairments limits one's ability to carrying out tasks, such as focusing on certain task. Reason for cognitive impairment include, but not limited to

1. CVA
2. Dementia

3. Medication Induced
4. Genetic abnormalities
5. Infections
6. Brain Trauma (accidental and non-accidental)
7. Affixation
8. Brain damage

Because individuals with a cognitive impairment can change how a person thinks (cognition), acts and/or feels. These changes often present special challenges for families and caregivers. The damage can impair one's ability to transform thoughts into meaningful speech, writing, or gestures. Individuals who suffer from a cognitive impairment do not have the ability to think clearly and logically. Often time if they do think clearly it is only for a short period of time (temporary). Caregivers responsible for caring for the cognitively impaired should employ care of patients and compassion. One must keep in mind that these individuals do not have to ability reason as someone with logic.

Signs of the cognitively impairment Patient.

According to the Family Caregiver Alliance (2015) individuals with cognitive impairment may experience a range of behavioral problems that can be frustrating for caregivers. These might include communication difficulties, perseveration (fixation on/repetition of an idea or activity), aggressive or impulsive behaviors, paranoia, lacking motivation, memory problems, incontinence, poor judgment, and wandering off and cannot find the way back. Some people may develop behavioral problems early on, while others go their entire illness with only minor issues.

Most cognitively-impaired persons fall somewhere in the middle, having good days and bad days (or even good or bad moments).

A few common signs of cognitive impairment include the following:

1. Having trouble exercising judgment (Failure to respond to a cooking pot being overheating on the stove)
2. Changes in mood or behavior
3. Frequently asking the same question or repeating the same story over and over
4. Not recognizing familiar people and places
5. Memory loss
6. Vision problems
7. Difficulty staying on task

Effective Communication Techniques

It is important to give the patient with cognitive disorders enough time to understand, and process what is being communicated. According to a study on early stages of dementia (Savundranayagam, and Orange, 2014), caregivers of individuals with a cognitive disorder indicated that the least effective (**ineffective**) communication strategies were:

1. Writing
2. Tuning out/ignoring
3. Pretending to understand
4. Asking for clarification
5. Speaking loudly

6. Asking the patient to repeat what was said

The study (Savundranayagam, and Orange, 2014) concluded that successful (**effective**) communication strategies were:

1. Providing the patients with more information
2. Repetition
3. Simplification
4. Rephrasing.

Repetition yield the most successful results because constant repetition and reinforcement help the patients to remember. It is also helpful to:

1. Ask one question at a time
2. Keep language simple
3. Simplify Task
4. Use statement such as, it is time to take a bath, here is a towel and a wash cloth.

The study regarding **communication strategies on cognitive impairment** (Savundranayagam, and Orange, 2014) also concluded that successful communication strategies that were effective **in both early and late stages included:**

1. Give more information
2. Repeat
3. Simplify
4. Rephrase
5. Ask to repeat

6. Try to figure out meaning
7. Fill in missing information
8. Show what you mean
9. Louder
10. Choices
11. Gesture
12. Ask questions
13. Ask for clarification
14. Continue talking

How to Care for the Aggressive Patient

Individuals with cognitive impairment may have lost the ability on an intellectual level to understand what is trying to be communicated to them. However, all of their other senses are completely intact. With cognitive impairment progression, some neuropsychiatric symptoms (i.e., delusional ideation, aberrant motor behavior, aggressiveness, affective disorder, and anxiety) become apparent in patients (Reisberg et al. 1987; Teng et al. 2007; Rosenberg et al. 2013). These symptoms have also been reported to share a common pathophysiology within a progressive sequence and to increase the economical and psychological burdens of caregivers (Matsumoto et al. 2007). Try to avoid physical contact with a patient who is aggressive. It is best not to push, pull, or take anything away from an aggressive patient especially if it is something personal that needs to be removed. Explain to the patients what you are trying to do, and speak slowly and clearly.

Summary

It can be very difficult to care for someone who is confused and aggressive. Keeping yourself, others, and the patient safe is important. Try not to restrain or use physical force on the patient. Restraining and physical force just makes the patient more aggressive. Follow your health care organizations policies and procedure on restraining a patient with a cognitive impairment.

Helpful hints that can calm the aggressive cognitively impaired patient:

1. Allow the patient to express their anger. Allowing the patient to express their anger can avoid physician violence.
2. It is a natural self-protective mechanism to become aggressive when a person believes that they are being threatened. Try to remain calm, rational, and quiet.
3. Use effective communication strategies when approaching an aggressive patient.
4. Use effective communication strategies when trying to accomplish activities of daily living.
5. Be Consistent
6. It is best not to frequently change care givers.
7. Make eye contact.

Aggressive interactions with individuals who are living with a cognitive impairment may become quite challenging and frustrating for caregiver, domestic partners, family members, and friends. Be patient and do not lose hope.

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