Using Cues as a Care Partner
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Through my career as an occupational therapist, I have conducted research and provided direct care to a wide variety of people, including those living with dementia. This has allowed me to learn how people living with dementia navigate their world when challenged by the effects of a changing brain. I would like to share with you some of my observations and some cues provided to us that can improve our work as Care Partners.

Sensory systems - what a person sees, hears, feels, smells, and tastes - help human beings understand and interact with their world. All people live in continuous cycles of taking in sensory data, processing, and then using that information. When someone has dementia, there is interference within the sensory processes. People living with dementia want to get along in the world and are trying to figure out how to do that just like anyone else. When working with a person living with dementia you will encounter some challenging situations. What you might be experiencing is a breakdown in his/her sensory process. And while it might seem confusing and create frustration for you, this is likely a person’s best attempt to understand and meet their own needs under the circumstances and with the abilities they are living with in that moment. People are driven and need to stay engaged with the world around them, although the abilities to do so safely and well are being eroded. Eventually, due to the effects of dementia, those we are caring for will need our help to do this.

The first and most important step is to observe. If you take the time to observe, you will often be able to discover the abilities a person living with dementia is actually working with at any given moment. If we can understand more fully what someone can do, instead of focusing on what they no longer can do, then we can choose to support and care for them in a way that will make sense. This begins with observations, not assumptions about what is happening.

Second, look for Sensory cues. All human beings are giving us clues and information about their ability through their action or behavior with others and the environment. Take an inventory by honestly observing and respecting how the person living with dementia is relating to the world through their five senses. When you observe the person doing or not doing something, it will provide you with valuable information about the person and his/her abilities. You will see both what that person is getting from their environment and their body as well as any unmet needs s/he is trying to address, but isn't able to on his/her own.

- Visual cues - Notice what a person is focused on. What can/do they see that might be different from what you are able to see? Visual cues are typically a human being’s first method and favorite way to take in informational data. Over time dementia causes many changes in the brain’s occipital lobe impacting a person's visual field, object recognition, figure-ground awareness, and depth perception. Due to these changes, a person literally may not know you are sitting next to them. They can't see you, even though you
might be able to see them. If you have observed and are aware of this, then you can help by moving yourself into a person's visual field, at a personally comfortable distance before attempting to communicate or provide support or care.

- **Auditory and Verbal cues** - If a person living with dementia is speaking to you but their words are not readily available, misused, or misinterpreted, what is the rhythm, the intensity, the pattern, the volume of what they are saying? Consider what they are saying or attempting to communicate with their actions, if not their words. Notice how they respond to you when you speak - or if they respond at all. A lack of response can also be a "cue" about ability in a particular moment. Do they hear you? Did they actually process what you said? Are they giving you a response that suggests they understood? What is happening in their body that might tell you? Set both of you up for success by looking for a cue from them for confirmation that what you thought transpired actually did.

- **Movement and Touch cues** - When you are observing a person, what is drawing interest, what is being avoided. What skill versus strength abilities are noted? Are there objects or tasks being attempted or avoided? Is there an action or reaction to movement, touch, or stillness that is worth exploring or paying attention to?

One important note is that typically people living with dementia exhibit curiosity, but frequently lack a sense of safety awareness. They may also see our behavior and efforts to keep them safe as threatening or unnecessary. Even though our failure to address safety concerns can result in problems and injuries, it is also likely that our impulsive attempts to enforce limits without thoughtful observation and use of skills can take a risky situation into a dangerous one in only a few seconds.

It's important to understand and be aware that over time there will be a change in all five experiences of sensation for a person living with dementia. This means change in visual abilities, auditory processing and comprehension ability. Please be careful not to confuse loss of comprehension with the hearing of sound, as these are two different things. In addition, one's ability to feel and manipulate an object, including touch sensation and find motor skills, will change over time. You will also notice a change in the ability to accurately identify smells and tastes as well as changes in a person's awareness of dangers associated with particular situations or items.

Every sensory experience is changing for the person living with dementia. This impacts behavior, the giving and receiving of communication, and therefore, relationships with others. If we truly understand this, and are willing to observe and stretch ourselves by looking at what's happening through the lens of curiosity, we can then further understand and choose to support and care for others in ways that make more sense. These changes in perspective will improve relationships and assist in setting realistic goals for care partner interactions. Most importantly, these changes give the person living with dementia - who is doing the best they can with what they have - a greater sense of value, individual choice, and sense of control throughout their life, as they are living it.