

## The Northland Caregiver Podcast

### Episode 3: How to Use Cues to Improve Communication

Leeza: Welcome to The Northland Caregiver, a podcast that's all about providing support to family and unpaid family caregivers looking for helpful information and advice on how to safely and effectively care for aging loved ones, family members, and themselves along the way.

I'm your co-host, Leeza Ochsner from Duluth Aging Support, a nonprofit behind this podcast on a mission to help enhance the lives of older adults and caregivers in the Northland through outreach, awareness, advocacy, and collaborative partnerships. And here with me is your host, an educator, and Registered Occupational Therapist, Dr. Mary Lou Donovan.

With National Caregiver Appreciation Month in full swing and Thanksgiving right around the corner, we wanted to take a moment to extend some extra gratitude to all of you out there caring for your aging loved ones, family members and friends.

Mary Lou: We so appreciate everything you do day in and day out. That's why it's so important to show yourself a little gratitude and self-care this holiday season, by maybe not taking on as much this Thanksgiving.

Instead of spending lots of time, money and effort making meals from scratch. Perhaps try serving fewer meals or picking up some premade pies at the grocery store, so that you can have a little bit more time to yourself or with your friends or loved ones. And while caregiving can seem like a thankless job at times, we really hope this podcast is a reminder to you that we're truly on this caregiver journey together.

Leeza: Mary Lou, I love that you said we're on this caregiver journey TOGETHER. Because when you think about it, we're all aging. Every single one of us is getting older, which means caregiving is going to be a part of all our lives in some capacity or another.

Mary Lou: That's right, Leeza. And as we age, we all experience changes in our bodies and how we interact with the world that we live in. Some examples of changes include physical changes, like getting stiffness in our knees, or hips, or changes in our sensory systems, like our vision or hearing decrease. Or changes to memory or thinking skills. You might be having some of those changes yourself, or the person you're caring for maybe show showing some of those changes. Sometimes those changes can make it tough for people to understand what others are saying to them, and can interfere with the communication between you and the person whom you're caring for.

Leeza: And that's why the focus of today's episode is all about how to modify the way we communicate with others as changes occur in order to improve the likelihood of your message being understood.

Mary Lou: Successful communication makes life way better for you as the caregiver and the person receiving care.

Leeza: So, speaking of successful communication, what does this look like Mary Lou?

Mary Lou: Well, successful communication is about sending and receiving messages in a way that the other person understands.

When we communicate, most of us use spoken or written words when we want to have a conversation, get something we need or give directions to someone else. Sometimes we might use gestures like pointing or giving a thumbs up. Much of what we have to say though, comes across in unspoken or nonverbal ways, like our facial expressions, or the way we're standing or the tone of our voice.

We give out messages and we look to see if the person understood that message. If the person we're trying to communicate with seems to not understand the message, we try to change something up about the words or our facial expressions or our posture. Because at the end of the day, we want other people to understand our messages. And likewise, we want to understand their messages.

As we move into our later years, and we're talking to a person with hearing loss, we learn to modify how loud we talked to them or speak towards the ear that has a better ability to hear. We're still talking with our usual sentences, but we may have to repeat a word or two.

Leeza: That makes sense. I mean, I can't even imagine how much more challenging communication became for so many individuals with hearing loss and their caregivers during Covid with things like masks and social distancing in place.

Mary Lou: Covid has made it particularly difficult for people with hearing loss to understand verbal information due to that mask wearing. So, that's why it's important to make sure the person you're talking to has their glasses and hearing aids that are working in place and to try to talk to them so they can see your face and your body language if possible. When wearing masks, we look at each other's eyes with so much more attention and they can tell us so much. It may also be helpful to have a notebook and a marker handy so you can write simple notes to help the person understand what you're trying to say.

As we experience visual loss with aging, we might start to wear glasses or use a magnifier because impaired vision may not cause us to not understand written directions or pictures. And when a person has decreased cognitive or memory abilities,

the words they hear or things they see might not make sense to them. And if you add in decreased vision and decreased hearing abilities, those messages can become even more confusing.

As a caregiver, you can be aware of those physical, sensory, and cognitive changes, and adjust the way you interact with the person who's receiving your care. However, it's important to note that awareness of a problem is only the start of helping a person receive the message we want them to understand. That's where knowing HOW to change up your cues, whether verbal, visual, auditory, or physical, is helpful.

Leeza: And what would be some examples of behaviors for each of the cues?

Mary Lou: Well, there are a continuum of communication approaches that we use. The first way you could give someone a cue is to tell it to them, so that that's really the highest-ranking order of cues, you might ask a question or give them a direction, you might have to slow down the delivery or use fewer words or different words to get your message across.

It's really important though to note that talking faster or louder doesn't usually help. You want your words to be more direct and eliminate any unnecessary words. You may feel like you're starting to sound like a general in the army. So, make sure you're really mindful of your tone. But the more direct your message, the more likely it will be to be understood.

Here's an example of using three levels of verbal cues to get someone to comb their hair. The first example is you saying you want to comb your hair before we go out to lunch with Mabel at that new restaurant downtown. So, in this message, you've used lots of words, making it easy for the person to focus on the restaurant, or on downtown, or whatever, instead of combing their hair. So, the second example is you saying comb your hair please, a much shorter and more direct message. And the third example is you same comb hair, that's a very specific and a very direct message with no additional extra words added in.

So, in the first example, your message to have the person comb their hair, will maybe get lost with all of the extra words you said to them. However, in the last two examples, the language is much more direct and to the point and thus, your message is more likely to be received and understood.

If the person didn't understand what you're saying to them, you could also give them visual cues. For some activities, you might be able to use words or pictures for the person to follow. You can have a list of simple steps perhaps, or the tasks the tasks that you want them to do written down. For example, you could have labels on drawers or cupboard doors to show where things are stored. There's a great website used by Occupational Therapists called seniors flourish, where you can find simple pictures, you can print to put on the outside of cupboard doors or drawers. It also has additional tips

you can use for visual cues for a person with cognitive loss. The information about this website will be available in the show notes.

Leeza: That sounds really helpful. But what if the person you're trying to communicate with has lost the ability to follow a series of steps like written or picture directions. Can you use other cues?

Mary Lou: Yes, and this may happen as a person's dementia progresses. So, you can use other visual cues like pointing at something or giving the person an item or actually modeling the direction on yourself. Using the previous example of hair combing to show you, you can provide progressive visual cues such as the written steps for combing hair, a picture of someone combing their hair or model, what it looks like to actually comb your hair on yourself.

And the third type of cue we can use is called an auditory cue. If the person did not understand the verbal or visual cues, then you may need to draw their attention to the task by helping them hear a sound. One way you can do this is to tap on or near the item you want them to use. This type of cue could be especially helpful for someone who has a decreased vision. So, using our hair combing example, with that auditory cue, you can tap by the comb or brush so they can hear where you want them to look. And they'll see the comb and then they might pick it up. Or you might want to tap on the corner or the table where the comb is located. You could do either one of those things to give the person an auditory cue.

The fourth type of cue we can use is a physical cue. So, with physical cues, you could be touching the person's elbow or their wrist or hand to remind them to use that hand to actually do the task. A person may need help either to start or stop a task and this is something that caregivers oftentimes don't know.

So, the key point is that the person's doing the task for themselves versus you doing it for them. And that's a big thing. So, I encourage you to let the person do as much for themselves as long as possible, as long as it's safe. So, you might have to start them with the hair calming. Or you might have to stop them with a hair combing. But they're doing the task for themselves. So that's an important thing to remember. The next way you can use a physical cue is to provide what we call hand over hand or physical assistance. To help with the task, the person might be able to do 90% of the work while you provide the other 10%. Are they able to do the task for short time, but you'll need to finish the job. Using our hair combing example, again, you can put the comb in the person's hand and touch the hand or wrist, they use to comb their hair, or you can put the brush or comb in their hand and move the hand actually up to the person's hair and begin combing. Oftentimes, that's enough so that the person is going to remember the task and continue doing it by themselves. Sometimes you might have to physically stop them, as I said before, or you might have to help them reposition the comb to a different part of the hair.

Leeza: Thank you, Mary Lou, I especially love the part about caregivers letting the person do the task for themselves. What a valuable, important part. And what a great overview of ways to communicate with a person using all of the different types of cues.

Mary Lou: Well, and I'm going to follow up on what you said, we really don't often use just one kind of cue at a time. While each cue can be valuable on its own, we oftentimes use more than one type of cue at the same time. So, for example, you may point to the stove and say, don't forget to stir the soup on the stove. So, there you're using visual and verbal cues. You could also tap your toe on the threshold before a doorway to draw person's attention down to the bunk and model stepping over it while saying step over. So, that would be an example of auditory, visual, and verbal cues used together.

Leeza: Those multiple cues used together sound really helpful, especially when we think about communicating with someone that's used to relying on those verbal or auditory cues when you're both wearing a mask, for example with Covid.

Mary Lou: Absolutely. In reality, you know, we do this cue giving so automatically. But for caregivers, it's important that you become aware of the cues that you're giving to other people and to the person that you're caring for. And we hope the main takeaway from today's podcasts is that there are many ways we change as we age and all of us benefit from having information given to us in different ways. As a caregiver, you might find more success in communicating with the person you're caring for who has limitations by using different cueing approaches.

Leeza: If this is your first time listening, we always wrap up every episode by having Mary Lou answer a local caregiver's question. And this one has a lot to do with communication. One of our local caregivers is wondering, what is the best way to communicate with someone with dementia who is showing angry behaviors?

Mary Lou: Well, Leeza, this is a question I've heard so many times before. And, you know, a lot of times caregivers don't anticipate an outburst or some kind of negative behavior from the person that they're caring for. And so, it catches people off guard when they see those angry or complicated behaviors.

What I like to teach caregivers is a process they can use called the ABC method. And it's used in a lot of different settings where a person might be showing some kind of behavioral problems. So, the A in the ABC method starts for stands for antecedent, or what happened to the person directly before you saw the behavior that occurred. And the B stands for the behavior or what the specific behavior was that you really saw. And C stands for consequences or what happened directly after the behavior occurred.

So, the premise of the ABC method is that if you can determine what caused the behavior, or the antecedent, you may be able to change that antecedent, so they won't be creating the behavior and you'll get a better outcome or consequence. And that's

an important thing for caregivers to understand...what's set off the behavior. Because if you can change that up, then you probably are going to be able to change up the consequence, that negative behavior that you don't want to see.

Since you just learned about all the different types of communication cues during this episode, from your observations, again, using the ABC method, you can figure out what that antecedent was that set off that person's behavior. So, here's an example: you tell your loved one that they have to get dressed quickly because you have to leave for their appointment in 15 minutes. In this example, that's the antecedent, the person reacts with anger because they feel like they're being rushed and pushed and hurried, so they won't get dressed, which is their behavior. Then the consequence might be, you're late for that appointment. So, in order to change a behavior like that, you may want to give the person what we call a countdown, where you announce the upcoming event an hour before, "Hey, we're going to be leaving in an hour, so you want to make sure you're getting dressed." And then at 45 minutes before you leave, "Okay, you got to get dressed, we're leaving at 45 minutes," And 30 minutes and 15 minutes, and so on. Do that countdown before it's time to leave to help give the person a sense of the amount of time that they have to get dressed. And hopefully, they can approach it with less stress.

However, sometimes the consequences of the behavior are rewarding for the person. That's another thing you have to watch for. Again, an example of this is a person constantly calling out, they want to get attention. And the attention that you give them for calling out is actually their reward. So, every time they do the behavior, you're giving them the reward, and people don't realize that. Instead, give that person something that they enjoy doing that occupies their attention. And hopefully that will diminish that calling out behavior. Know, though, that you might have to change up that enjoyable activity after time. So, we'll talk about various kinds of enjoyable activities to have on hand in another podcast. The ABC model can be a really effective way to understand challenging behaviors and develop suitable responses with a positive behavior plan for the person you're caring for.

Leeza: Thank you, Mary Lou, very helpful.

And if you have a caregiver related question that you would like us to answer during another episode of The Northland caregiver, you can submit your questions to [podcast@duluthagingsupport.org](mailto:podcast@duluthagingsupport.org) or you can also call us at 218-576-7123 and simply leave your question as a message on our voicemail.

You can also find other helpful resources on the Duluth Aging Support website. That's [www.duluthagingsupport.com/resources](http://www.duluthagingsupport.com/resources). Once you're on the resources page of the site, click on the caregiver support category to view all of the resources we have available. And as always, don't forget to subscribe to our podcast, The Northland Caregiver on Spotify and Apple podcast, or wherever you find your podcast. And check out our show notes for additional references mentioned throughout this episode.

Mary Lou: Well, thanks again for tuning in. And we hope you'll join us next month as we discussed holiday tips for caregivers as well as answer a question from local caregiver in the Northland just like you. Until next time, take care!

Leeza: The Northland Caregiver podcast is brought to you by Duluth Aging Support, a nonprofit organization that helps enhance the lives of older adults and caregivers in the Northland through outreach, awareness, advocacy, and collaborative partnerships.

Transcribed by: <https://otter.ai>