



## MARYLAND COALITION ON MENTAL HEALTH & AGING

711 West 40<sup>th</sup> Street ♦ Suite 460 ♦ Baltimore, Maryland 21211 ♦ (410) 235-1178 ♦ FAX (410) 235-1180

### COMMUNICATION: A Fact Sheet to Share

The experience of self, others, and life usually changes for a person experiencing a mental illness. These changes impact relationships and communication can take a turn towards the negative. A person with depression, for example, may become argumentative. A person with anxiety may express constant worry.

The following communication approaches seem obvious. However, when dealing with unkind, inappropriate or confusing words and behaviors of a person with a mental illness or dementia, appropriate and respectful responses may not come naturally. Try to put aside your feelings and remember to do the following:

#### Approaches:

- First, understand that you are communicating more with an illness than the true nature of the person who is ill. Try not to take hurtful comments personally.
- Move to a familiar or safe place free of distractions.
- Use a calm and unhurried approach, maintain eye contact, and speak in a low and even tone. Your body language should reflect an open and non-threatening position.
- Keep statements / directions / questions simple.
- Do not argue. Arguing escalates most problems. Let go of being right and aim for being a good listener.
- Let the person know that their feelings and experiences are understood. Show that you are hearing them by reflecting back what they have said. For example, “I hear that you are really angry at me. I understand how you feel when I tell you what to do.”
- Offer reassurance and assistance if necessary. Be honest.
- Make sure that older adults have the aids and equipment that they need. Hearing aids, glasses, dentures, adaptive equipment, etc. are critical to a person’s ability to fully communicate.
- **If the person denies the obvious signs of disease or decline, share your concerns and ask for cooperation in getting a “check-up”.**

Providing reassurance, communicating with a positive attitude and providing orientation to an agitated or confused person are important techniques to improve communication however, they will not reverse the course of a mental or dementing illness. This can be extremely frustrating. When you truly understand that a person is communicating and behaving according to the symptoms of a disease, it can be easier to tolerate their behaviors, expressions and emotions. Check to make sure your expectations are *realistic* given the illness of the other person. You may need to adjust your expectations.

Further information on mental health can be found on the website [www.mdaging.org](http://www.mdaging.org) or contact Kim Burton at 410-235-1178 x 210.

