

**'I Already Told You – Don't You Remember?'**  
**Understanding Memory Loss,  
 Dementia & Dementia Communication**

**Presented by:**  
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**Presented for:**  
 North Dakota  
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 Aging and Disabilities**  
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**Introductions, Background & What You Can Expect**

- **Erin Bonitto, M.S., A.D.C.**
  - Founder & Lead Coach of Gemini Consulting, Inc.
  - Dementia Educator & Dementia Communication Coach
- **Philosophy**
- **What to Expect Today**
- **Handouts & Pens Ready**

**Part A**

- Dementia Definitions
- Understanding Memory Loss in Dementia

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**Definitions: AAMI vs. Dementia**

**Age-Associated Memory Impairment – AAMI**

- Misplacing your keys
- Forgetting your friend's name
- Forgetting what you walked into the room to get
- Forgetting where you just parked the car

**Temporary lapses in memory in otherwise healthy adults**

**Senior Moments or Fatigue or Stress or Too Many Details  
 The Normal Forgetfulness of Everyday Life**

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**DEMENTIA** A term used to describe a number of conditions that are characterized by the gradual loss of intellectual functioning.

**A Text Book Definition**

1. Memory impairment, **AND**
2. One of more of the following cognitive difficulties:
  - Language difficulties (aphasia)
  - Impaired ability to conduct motor activities (apraxia)
  - Failure to recognize or identify objects (agnosia)
  - Disturbances in intellectual functioning, such as planning, organizing and abstract thinking.

Source: www.alzheimers.com, Gerontology Center of the University of Southern California

**An Umbrella Term**

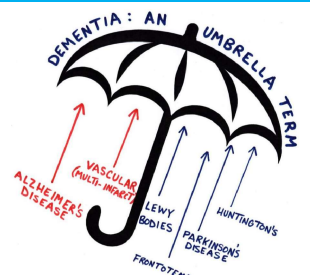
• Dementia is just a **word**, not a disease.

• There are **many** underlying diseases or conditions that can cause dementia.

• Just a few are illustrated here.

• The **Alzheimer's Assn.** is a great resource to learn more about all the possible causes.

• **www.alz.org**



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### 10 Early Signs & Symptoms of Alzheimer's

1. Memory loss that disrupts daily life.
2. Challenges in planning or solving problems. ➡ **Going Out in Winter**
3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure.
4. Confusion with time or place.
5. Trouble understanding visual images & spatial relationships.

alzheimer's association  
**KNOW the 10 SIGNS**  
 www.alz.org

### 10 Early Signs & Symptoms of Alzheimer's

6. New problems with words in speaking or writing. ➡ **Unusual word substitution**
7. Misplacing things & losing the ability to retrace steps. ➡ **Unusual misplacement**
8. Decreased or poor judgment.
9. Withdrawal from work or social activities.
10. Changes in mood & personality.

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This list is for information only and not a substitute for a consultation with a qualified professional.

### Memory Loss in Alzheimer's Disease

**What Happens to the Brain with Alzheimer's Disease?**

### The Memory Glue Guy

Nobody gave me breakfast! I haven't had a **thing** to eat in this place!

Nobody told me about the car! I can drive it right now if I want to!

You've just left me here. You **never** come to visit!

I didn't go to the music program! Nobody even **told** me about it!

Nobody told me I'd have to **stay** here!

For the person with Alzheimer's Disease, their Memory Glue Guy is being **murdered**.

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### Often, our instinct is to 'remind & reassure.'

(This comes from a genuine desire to be helpful – but unfortunately, it's not.)

You already had breakfast, don't you **remember?**

It's not safe for you to live alone anymore, since you fell, **remember?**

You know I come here every day. I always come after lunch, **remember!**

The doctor said you aren't supposed to drive anymore, **remember?**

Let's eliminate the phrase: **'Don't you remember?'**

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It's important to **avoid** correcting the person or trying to 'force' their memory recall.

**'Don't you remember?'**  
*or*  
**'You know that!'**

Often times, what are the **results** of 'reminding & reassuring'?

- Causes additional frustration for both persons
- Escalates the situation for both persons
- Causes a deep fear or concern for the person

So what can we do instead?

**Step into the person's reality.**  
**Validate their emotion.**

This is compassionate caregiving.  
Plus, it usually helps 'pause' the situation a bit.

So what can we do instead?

**Step into their reality.**  
**Validate their emotion.**  
This is compassionate caregiving.

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Stepping into Their Reality

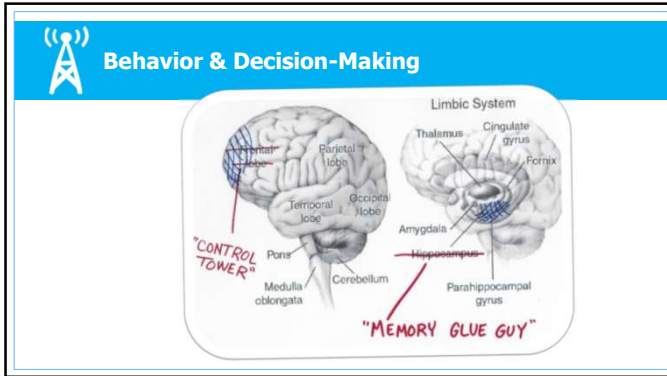
**We are not lying.**  
**We are stepping into this person's truth.**

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**Part B**

- Behavioral Changes in Dementia
- Communication Changes in Dementia

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**Damage to the Control Tower Can Cause**

**Out-of-Character Responses**  
 Saying or doing something he never would have done in his lifetime.

swearing – hollering out – hitting  
 saying unkind things – sexual actions

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He knows what he's doing!  
 He's really being inappropriate lately!  
 I told him he couldn't do that!

**'Out-of-Character'**

- Increased frequency
- Increased intensity
- Increased occurrences in public settings.

**Take-Home Message for Out-of-Character Responses**

**Understand**  
 and do **not** react negatively to **out-of-character responses**.  
 Avoid 'scolding' messages.

**Do Not Internalize 'Unkind' Comments.**  
 This symptom is a part of the disease process.

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**Damage to the Control Tower Can Create**

**Some Changes to Routines & Preferences**

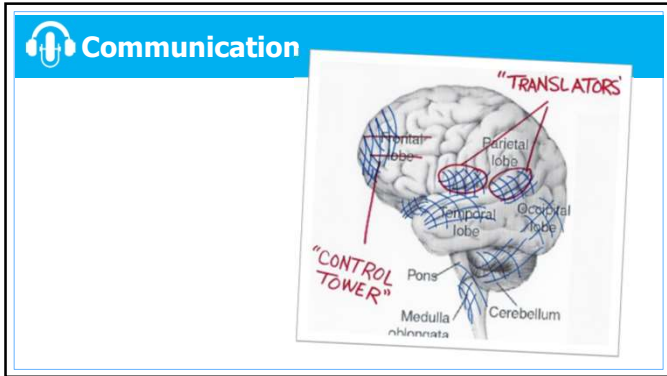
- A person who was always an 'early bird' may now sleep-in very late,
- A person who showered every day may now only tolerate washing-up at a sink occasionally,
- A person who 'always matched' may enjoy selecting some eye-watering clothing combinations,
- A man who always shaved may be okay with some stubble,
- A person who never would have showed-up to a meal in pajamas, may now find it quite comfy.

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**Key point**


While we want to understand and respect **life-long preferences**, we must also honor and support **the person before us today.**

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### Key Points

We must adjust **how we speak** to make it easier for the person to understand us.



This means simpler statements, using concrete, familiar words and potentially very long pauses for processing.

## Part C

- Skills for Dementia Communication

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### Taking Dad to Doctor's Appointment: Version 1

I was standing over him (putting me in control)

My approach was too fast to build trust or allow for transition

Negative, stressed facial expression & body language

Possibly too many words & questions for him to translate everything

He may have been a little unsure about exactly who I was (or what this is all about)

He felt embarrassed or indignant due to my reminders and scolding demeanor.

### taking Dad to a doctor's appointment

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### Taking Dad to Doctor's Appt: Version 2

### The Initial Approach & Overall Demeanor

- **Before** walking-in: Deep breaths & grounding!
- Smile & approach from the front with a **warm**, easy manner.
- Carefully monitor your **facial** expression, **body** language, and **tone of voice**.
- Get to – and remain at or below **eye-level**.
- Subtly help the person 'place' who you are – if necessary.
- **No** 'reminding' or 'scolding' or 'quizzing.'
- Light-hearted demeanor and **shared jokes** to reduce apprehension and build trust, if necessary.
- In this example, we will [ ] but the information will be provided in **stages**. A different strategy may work better for the person you care for – every situation and person is unique.

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### Verbal Communication Skills

- Use short, **simple statements**.  
(Consider 7 words or less as a general rule)
- **Avoid** questions when necessary, instead phrasing as a statement.
- **Pause**, pause, pause... allowing ample time for the person to process and respond.
- Use **familiar**, concrete words.
- Use good **vocal quality** to help the person hear you & focus on you.

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### General Tips for Visiting a Person with Dementia

- For infrequent visitors: If you are visiting, treat every interaction as if it's your **first** time meeting – or as if it has been a **very long time** – because it may feel that way to the person.
- **Do Not Quiz the Person**. Even though it is intended as a helpful, even playful way to create a connection, it is **not** helpful. It generally results in the person feeling frustrated, foolish, or afraid.  
*'What's my name?' 'You remember me, don't you?'*
- Instead, **offer your name** and a bit about yourself – to gently help the person connect.
- If the person does **not** remember you specifically, simply continue on as a friendly visitor.

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### Essential Strategy:

#### Stepping Authentically into the Person's World

- Gently step into **this person's emotional reality**, resisting the urge to re-orient the person to our reality.
- **Do not** argue or correct.
- Instead, **validate** what the person is experiencing & feeling.
- **Key Point:**  
*We are not lying. We are stepping into this person's truth.*

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### Skill Practice: Vocal Quality (Down Talking with Focusing Voice)

#### Practice Set Family Care Partners

- "You've got that doctor's appointment today..."
- "We have to get moving..."
- "Here, eat some toast..."
- "We need to wait for the nurse..."
- "Jack, let's go see what they're doing..."
- "The party starts at 3:00..."
- "We don't want to be late!"



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### Skill Practice: When Visiting

When necessary, know how to introduce yourself and others (sometimes in a 'playful' way)

- "Hey Dad. It's me Erin."
- "Hi Dad. It's me Erin – your oldest!"
- "Hi Dad. It's me Erin – your favorite."
- "It's me Susan. Your best-looking wife."
- "This is Jackson. Jackson is Kathleen's son."
- "These two girls are Rachel's daughters."
- "This is Pastor Astrup, from Peace."

**Skill Practice: When Visiting** Avoid questions.

**Instead of:**

- "Have you had a good day?"
- "What did you have for lunch?"
- "Do you want to go outside?"
- "Do you have to go to the bathroom?"
- "What did Jane say when she called?"
- "Is your back hurting?"
- "Did you tell the nurse your back was hurting again?"

**Try:**

- "I hope it's been a good day."
- "I heard you had chicken for lunch."
- "We should take a walk outside."
- "Let's stop by the restroom first."
- "I heard Jane called last night."
- "It looks like your back is sore."
- "Let's tell the nurse about your back."

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**Part D**


Spending Time Together

Creating moments of genuine pleasure, purpose and peace.

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**Daily Rituals & Rhythms**

Often, pleasure, purpose & peace can be found in the **simple rhythms** of the day.



<p><b>Personal Care</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Picking out what to wear,</li> <li>• Singing or humming while showering or combing hair,</li> <li>• Making faces while putting on make-up,</li> <li>• Pampering &amp; painting nails,</li> <li>• Cleaning eye glasses</li> </ul>	<p><b>Meals &amp; Snacks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoying a cup of coffee together</li> <li>• Enjoying familiar aromas                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bacon in the frying pan</li> <li>• Cookies in the oven</li> <li>• Sauerkraut on the stovetop</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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**Life Skills & Responsibilities**



Changing our Lens from 'Doing for' to 'Doing with'

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**Meal-Time & Food Prep**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selecting a recipe to make</li> <li>• Writing down a recipe to share</li> <li>• Setting the table</li> <li>• Washing &amp; Drying Dishes</li> <li>• Wiping &amp; Clearing Tables</li> <li>• Sweeping up the kitchen</li> <li>• Slicing a banana for cereal</li> <li>• Making scrambled eggs</li> <li>• Buttering toast</li> <li>• Frying a hamburger</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frying a hamburger</li> <li>• Peeling potatoes &amp; carrots</li> <li>• Peeling or slicing vegetables</li> <li>• Snapping beans, husking corn</li> <li>• Shelling peanuts</li> <li>• Chopping nuts</li> <li>• Making muffins</li> <li>• Baking brownies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measuring ingredients</li> <li>• Breaking eggs</li> <li>• Greasing a pan</li> <li>• Stirring batter</li> <li>• Pouring liquids</li> <li>• Kneading dough</li> <li>• Forming meatballs</li> <li>• Assembling a sandwich</li> </ul>
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? What can the person safely do on their own? ?  
 What can they safely do with a 'spotter'?

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**Household Chores**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watering indoor plants</li> <li>• Cleaning leaves of indoor plants</li> <li>• Tending Plants &amp; Gardens</li> <li>• Caring for Animals</li> <li>• Cleaning Leaves of Plants</li> <li>• Dusting</li> <li>• Vacuuming</li> <li>• Sweeping</li> <li>• Washing windows or mirrors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cleaning sink</li> <li>• Loading or unloading dishwasher</li> <li>• Wiping down countertops</li> <li>• Polishing shoes</li> <li>• Folding clothes &amp; towels</li> <li>• Putting clothes &amp; towels away</li> <li>• Organizing a drawer</li> <li>• Clipping coupons</li> <li>• Walking the dog</li> <li>• Brushing cat/dog</li> <li>• Feeding cat/dog</li> </ul>
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What can the person safely do on their own?  
 What can they safely do with a 'spotter'?

?

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### 'Tinkering' and Simple Repairs

**Nail Hole**

**Check Air Pressure**

**Loose Hinge**

**Running Toilet**

**Loose Curtain Rod**

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### Outdoors: Nature & Weather

**Experiences**

- Taking a walk outside,
- Sitting outside together,
- Having lemonade outside,
- Checking the rain gauge,
- Checking the temperature,
- Checking the forecast,
- Watching birds at a feeder,
- Watching birds in a bird bath,
- Feeding squirrels,
- Watching a rabbit,
- Checking on a vegetable garden,
- Enjoying a flower bed,
- Smelling lilacs or cutting a lilac bouquet,

**Outdoor Chores**

- Planting bulbs,
- Planting vegetables or flowers,
- Pulling weeds,
- Trimming bushes,
- Watering outdoor plants,
- Filling bird feeder,
- Filling a bird bath,
- Sweeping sidewalk,
- Raking leaves,
- Shoveling snow.

**Why do these sensations matter?**

Warm sun  
 Cool breeze  
 Damp air  
 Crunchy leaves  
 Fresh cut grass  
 Cold air

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### Getting Out

**Going for Drives**

- Visit homesteads, farms, lakes, rivers, houses, construction projects, Main Street, churches, schools, etc.
- Trip to Dairy Queen, local café, Hardees, etc.
- Going to a gym, walking track, etc.
- Go shopping at the mall, hardware store, etc.
- Attend community events, concerts, etc.
- Experience the seasons: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter

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### Enjoying Time Together

- Blowing bubbles
- Reading jokes from a joke book
- Tic-Tac-Toe
- Watching videos on YouTube or TikTok
- Enjoying a digital photo frame
- Simple jigsaw puzzles
- Reading out loud
- Singing familiar old songs or hymns
- Finding a new show to enjoy
- Rolling coins

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### Finding Delight

Don't be trapped by preconceived notions of what the person **should** enjoy...

Instead, watch for what the person **truly does** enjoy.

### Part E

Wrap-Up

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**If you are a caregiver**

Use every available resource to ensure that you have some rest and support.

Appropriate dementia communication and connection requires tremendous energy, concentration and patience.

Be kind to yourself.

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**Thank You**

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**Erin Bonitto, M.S., A.D.C. – Founder & Lead Coach, Gemini Consulting.**

As the Founder and Lead Coach of Gemini Consulting, Erin Bonitto provides hands-on dementia communication coaching at partner communities across the nation, including skilled nursing homes, assisted living centers and memory care providers. Using the 'Buddies Forever Dementia Communication Coaching System,' Erin's partner communities learn how to provide persons with dementia the gifts of pleasure, purpose and peace – while making measurable impacts on clinical and operational goals related to psychotropic use, behavioral outcomes, fall rates, team member morale and family satisfaction. These projects have been grant-funded in several states and described by providers as their 'missing link' to culture transformation. Her educational background includes an M.S. in Gerontology and an Activity Director Certification – but her true education began with jobs in dietary and caregiving, throughout her high school and college years. When Erin is not providing coaching, she can be found as a popular featured speaker at aging services conferences. Additionally, Erin is a frequent presenter and coach for family, community, and lay caregiver groups – providing strategies with empathy – having a close loved one with dementia herself. She has been described as a speaker who "can bring tears to your eyes and make you laugh out loud," all while delivering real-world, nuts and bolts tools that participants can put to use immediately.



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