
Person Centred Thinking Tool 4

Communication

Having the power to communicate and to be understood is central to older people being able to have choice and control in their life - in fact, to have any quality of life at all. It is easy to assume that older people who cannot talk have little to say. Nora, who we met in the previous chapter, can only say 'yes', yet has at least four different ways of saying it, each conveying a different meaning. She has plenty to communicate, if we can also listen to the subtleties of her expression and body language.

When many staff support someone, each staff member may have a different idea of what the person is communicating with their behaviours or words.

The communication chart is a powerful and simple way to record how an older person communicates. This is critical to someone who doesn't talk, and is also important where people only use a few words, or communicate most powerfully with their behaviours.

The communication chart has four headings:

What is happening describes the circumstances.

What the person does clearly describes what the person says or does in enough detail that someone reading the chart who has not seen this behaviour would still recognise it. Where it is something

hard to describe, (e.g. a facial expression), you could use a picture. Some people have even developed video communication charts.

- **We think it means** describes the meaning that people think is present – a best guess. It is not uncommon for there to be more than one meaning for a single behaviour. Where this is the case, all of the meanings should be listed.
- **We should** describes what staff should do to respond to what the person is saying with their behaviour. This section gives us an insight into how the older person is perceived and supported.

It's easiest to complete a communication chart by starting with the two inside columns (starting with When does, and then moving onto We think it means). Following this, work out to the two outside columns (What is happening, and We should).

As an example, Nora's communication chart is on the following pages.

How can this tool be useful?

Thinking about communication

patterns and techniques is fundamental to person centred support and ensuring that older people are able to participate as full and active citizens no matter where they live or their support needs. The four level model described above is a practical and helpful way of breaking this issue down into manageable chunks. It makes it much simpler for everyone to understand.

Thinking differently about what is happening to a person (or around them), looking at and interpreting what the person is doing or communicating using non verbal signs and cues, and exploring what this means in order to support someone well - are all helpful in the following situations:

First contact with a service, new staff, volunteer or group

For example:

- In hospital, especially if admitted in an emergency or crisis.
- Being discharged home from hospital, to be supported at home often by a different team of people.
- Attending outpatient appointments, or a new kind of service or support group

What is happening/ where/when	When Nora does this	We think it means	And we should
<p>Anytime.</p> <p>Nora is being asked to make a choice or answer a question, for example choosing her clothes.</p>	<p>Nora shouts 'yes'.</p> <p>Nora says 'yes' but her facial expression is cross and her tone is sharp.</p> <p>Nora smiles and says 'yes' enthusiastically.</p>	<p>She wants to go to the bathroom.</p> <p>No, she doesn't like the item of clothing you are showing her or the answer to the question is no.</p> <p>Nora is telling us 'yes'.</p>	<p>Support her to the bathroom.</p> <p>Respect the answer to the question is no.</p> <p>Show her more options when choosing her clothes.</p>
<p>Nora is being asked to make a choice or answer a question.</p> <p>In the evening.</p>	<p>Nora will take her feet off her footstool, remove the rug from her knee and look in an obvious way at the clock.</p> <p>Nora grimaces and says 'yes' in a cross tone or swears.</p>	<p>She wants to get up out of her armchair and go to bed – usually 7.30ish.</p> <p>She is unhappy – perhaps her routine has not run like clockwork, the nurse is late or early (Nora hasn't finished her breakfast), somebody may have gone in her bedroom or she doesn't like what is on TV.</p>	<p>Depends on the question or choice but respond accordingly, letting Nora know we understand she has told us 'yes'.</p> <p>Check with Nora if she wants to go to bed. If so support her (see Noras' going to bed routine).</p> <p>Sit and talk to her.</p>
<p>Anytime.</p>	<p>Nora holds your hand / smiles at everybody.</p>	<p>She is happy.</p>	<p>Enjoy her company.</p>

Nora's communication chart

What is happening/ where/when	When Nora does this	We think it means	And we should
If Nora has swore at you at some point that day/night.	Nora takes your hand and says 'yes, yes, yes' in a positive way.	I am sorry, forgive me.	Reassure her.
Anytime	Nora shouts and shakes her finger.	Nora is angry or frustrated.	Talk to Nora. Acknowledge her anger/frustration.
Anytime	Nora tilts her head to the side and utters words softly.	Nora is feeling sympathetic towards somebody.	Acknowledge her kindness.
Anytime	Nora is very quiet and does not smile.	She is feeling sad or bad.	Talk to her – ask what is wrong.



Nora's communication chart

(e.g. employing a personal assistant, going to a mobility or independent living centre for the first time, attending a day centre or drop in/lunch club for the first time, and so on).

- Moving to a new place or area.

Assessment and care plans

If someone does not use many words to communicate, it is vital that any assessment or care plan builds this into an assessment, and that any support or care plan includes a communication chart.

Reviews

If someone has a communication chart, then a review is a good opportunity to look at this. Check that it is up to date, that everyone is using it and that it is working well for the older person.

we want to tell...	to do this we	helped/ supported by

at this time	when this happens	we think it means	and we do this

