



# Communication at End-of-Life



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Centres for Learning,  
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Conversations about end-of-life are hard for everyone involved. They can be uncomfortable and emotionally charged.

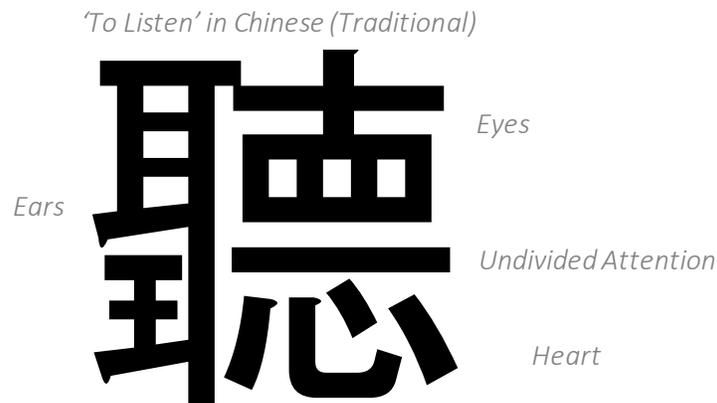
When you communicate with respect, compassion and clarity, you build positive relationships with residents and their families and friends based on trust, respect and understanding.

When you do this, you do your part to support them as they work through these challenging times.

Here are some tools to help you navigate conversations about end-of-life.

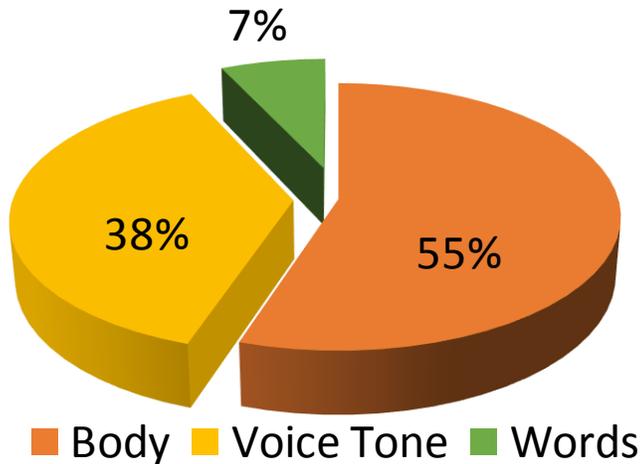
## Communication Starts with Listening:

The Chinese characters that are used to make up the verb 'to listen' relay many different elements that are involved in really listening to another: Ears, Eyes, Undivided Attention and Heart. This offers a really important overview of how many different senses, and parts of ourselves, we need to use to really listen to someone.



## Communication Isn't Just About the Words:

When you are worried about what words to say, pay attention to how you are saying them.



### **BODY:** Be sure that your body language communicates what you want it to.

- To communicate respect and equality: bring yourself to the same level as the other person
- To communicate willingness to engage: maintain an open posture, such as keeping your arms at your sides
- To communicate warmth and friendliness: smile
- To communicate interest, engagement and respect: maintain eye contact
- To communicate empathy and concern: use touch as appropriate, for example, by lightly touching someone's hand

### **TONE:** Consider how you say it. It's not just what you say; it's how you say it. Be mindful of:

- Tone
- Volume
- Pacing
- Pitch
- Emphasis on words

**Remember:** People may interpret signals differently. Some cultures see extended eye contact or touch as disrespectful or too forward, for example. Keep in mind that people within the same culture may have different norms.

## Paraphrasing – A Communication Skill:

Paraphrasing is a communication skill that can be used to build rapport with someone.

### What is paraphrasing?

- A verbal response which accurately restates what the other person said
- Deals only with cognitive content, i.e. only what someone has actually said
- Is fact based
- The paraphraser uses their own words to restate what the resident or family member has said
- The paraphraser uses fewer words than the original communicator

In paraphrasing, one person takes what they have heard from the resident or family member and relays back what they have heard. When paraphrasing, it is important to check-in to see if you heard everything that is important to the resident or family member, i.e. “What I heard you say is ..., is that right?”

### Why is paraphrasing important?

- It communicates to the other person that you understand what they have said
- It validates that you are listening to them
- It provides an opportunity for correcting misperceptions
- It allows the other person to hear what they have said
- It allows the other person to expand on what he or she thinks and feels

### Remember:

Do not add to what you hear. You may be tempted to add to the resident’s or family member’s message. Try to overcome the urge to interpret or project your own thoughts into the interaction. This often takes the focus off the resident or family member and puts it on you.

## Practice paraphrasing:

### Activity with a Partner

One of the most important skills in creating a therapeutic relationship is listening. Paraphrasing is one technique to ensure you understand what your partner is communicating. This conversation should be kept strictly confidential. Make a contract agreement with your partner regarding this issue. Follow the instructions in the order presented. You will take turns speaking and being the listener. The listener will practice paraphrasing what they are listening to.

Position yourselves in a comfortable sitting arrangement for conversation and privacy. Describe one role you have in your life. Share your thoughts and feelings on how this role impacts your life. Speak for a few sentences and then allow your listener to paraphrase what they have heard. This should take about 2 minutes in total. Take turns and speak of 3 roles. Do not carry on a conversation; this is an exercise to practice paraphrasing.

This paraphrasing exercise enables the two of you to go through the following steps one at a time. Decide which one of you is to speak first on this topic; the other will be the listener. The listener paraphrases in their own words what the speaker has just said. The speaker must be satisfied that they have been heard accurately before continuing. The listener must check in with the speaker.

The person to speak (speaker) is to talk about the following topic in two or three sentences: Describe a work-related event that has happened to you that was complicated.

Repeat this process with these topics: Speak about what it is like for you to care for elderly frail people. Speak about a challenging work experience with a family member of one of your residents. Share your greatest concerns about caring for someone who is dying. After you both have had a chance to listen and speak about these three statements share any insights about listening and paraphrasing. This is a time for conversation and insight about the use of paraphrasing.

## Empathy and Empathetic Listening:

Expressing empathy allows you to enter into a resident's or family member's world, to explore their feelings and meaning.

### Sympathy vs. Empathy

Sympathy: my feelings about your situation

Empathy: grasping your feelings about a situation

Brené Brown, Ph.D, is a research professor at the University of Houston. Her research focuses on vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. Watch Brené explain the difference between empathy versus sympathy. *Click the image below.*



### What are empathetic statements?

- Verbal statements made by the care provider which accurately state what the other person feels
- Addresses emotions/feelings
- Allows the carer to express their perception of what the other person feels

### What are the goals of empathetic listening?

- To support residents or family members in sharing their thoughts and feelings
- To help residents or family members access their full range of thoughts and feelings
- To enhance residents or family members problem-solving by helping them move through 'stuck' feelings
- To generate a feeling of warmth and understanding between you and the resident or family member

## Practice Empathetic Listening:

### Activity with a Partner

- What are some of your own fears about your death?
- Share what thoughts and feelings come to mind when you think about your own losses.
- Share your thoughts and feelings about attending funerals and wakes.
- When you think about growing old, what the most difficult part of it for you and why?

Continue to have the speaker share insights on the topics below, and then have the listener verify the accuracy of what they have understood using paraphrasing and empathetic reflecting.

- Talk about your first death on the job working in long-term care.
- If you have not cared for a resident at the time of death, speak about thoughts and feelings anticipating having a resident die while you are caring for them.
- Speak about what it would be like for you if you were living your last days in a home like the one you are currently employed at.

Have a 2-3 minute discussion about this learning experience so far. Keep eye contact as much as you can and try to cover the following points in your discussion:

- How well are you both listening?
- How open and honest have you both been?
- How do you feel about this interchange?
- Do you feel that you are getting to know each other?
- What body language are you giving and receiving
- Are you sharing the listener and speaker time equally?

## Improving Communication:

### Awareness:

When we improve our communication, we will build awareness, and this awareness can help us become receptive to reading new things and can inspire us to journal and reflect on our experiences. Building awareness promotes more awareness, as there are always new things for us to learn about whom we are, and how we communicate with others.

### Awkwardness:

While it can be difficult to find ourselves in awkward situations, as we improve our communication, we will build more confidence about how to respond in these situations, and our experiences will build on one another.

### Skillfulness:

Developing more skills in communication can make us receptive to working and learning with others, which then allows us to 'test out' and practice our skills. Having the opportunity to build our skills is important, as this learning can be applied to other aspects of our lives.

### Integration:

Integrating our skills, and witnessing how our interactions with others shift and change as we grow in our skills, is a huge motivator to continue growing and learning.



## Learn More

The **Communication at End-of-Life (CEoL)** program offers bilingual education materials that provide LTC educators with tools for teaching palliative and end-of-life communication skills to team members by combining didactic, peer-to-peer, and scenario-based learning. A variety of resources have been created surrounding communication at end-of-life, including Facilitators Guide, PowerPoint Modules, webinar, an article from AdvantAge Ontario's Action Update, information packages, and an FAQ. See below for links to these items.

The CEoL training program was developed in partnership between the Ontario CLRI at Bruyère and Algonquin College.

Learn more at [clri-ltc.ca/ceol](http://clri-ltc.ca/ceol)

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