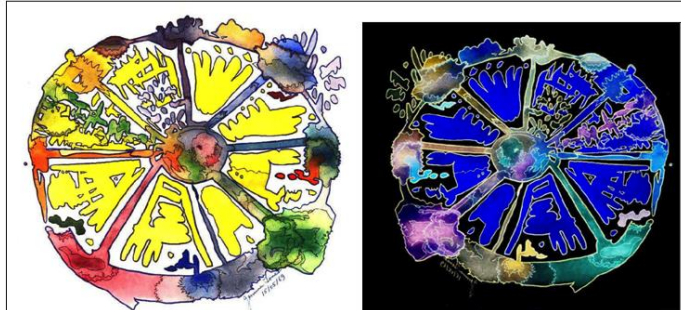


from 'TheWideSpectrum.co.uk' website  
**TAD (Thoughts About Dementia) Newsletter**  
**By: Dr. Gemma M. M. Jones**



**TAD 71**      20 August, 2021  
**The 'Ten plus communication options model':  
Option 4 - Distract**

**Related ideas for observations, reflection and research**

- Did you ever try to deliberately distract a teacher (by yourself, or in a agreement with the whole class)- so that they were unable to deliver the intended material? Did you succeed?
- Have you ever had to try distract a baby from his/her teething pains, or other pain? Can you recall what techniques you tried?
- Have you ever gone through customs with something you probably shouldn't have in your suitcase? If so, how did you minimize your chance of being discovered? Did you use any communication tactics?
- Did you ever try help someone, by distracting them while they ate something they didn't like but needed to eat?
- Have you ever thought about how many types of distraction techniques there are, and if so, how you might categorize them?
- Did you ever succeed in distracting yourself from a task you didn't want to do? (Did you ever do things like - go shopping, read, watch TV, play on the computer, or phone someone)? Did you remain aware, in some way, at some level, that you were distracting yourself?
- How many of these same methods have you used with someone with dementia?

Dear Reader,

This TAD expands upon Option 4 of the 'Ten plus communication options model' for dementia care, - **distract**. (See the previous TAD newsletters for details of the models and options one and two <sup>1-4</sup>.) **Box 1** gives a brief summary of the model.

**Box 1** Summary of the 'Ten plus communication options model' (Jones, 1985)

- 1** **Gather information**; ask 'good' questions to find out about the person's story
- 2** **Orient** the person to what's happening, explain 'the facts'
- 3** **Reminisce**

- 4 **Distract**, directly and indirectly
  - 5 **Agree**; play along with
  - 6 **Lie** – told to make a person feel better, but a lie none the less
  - 7 **Social response**; superficial, safe topics
  - 8 **Validate** (acknowledge) the person’s feelings
  - 9 **Idle**, stall for ‘thinking’ time; remain quiet; repeat last thing person said
  - 10 **Combinations** of the above options - used consecutively
- Plus Humour (with provisos), ..... and other options**

Note that ‘becoming defensive’ and ‘trying to show the person you are right and they are mistaken’ are NOT options in this model.

**‘Distraction’ is a communication method and a goal -**

As a verbal communication option, distraction refers to speaking with a person to change their focus of attention (concern). As a goal, **it is often used too early.**

‘Too early’ means trying to distract a person:

- 1) before their emotions have been acknowledged/ validated directly
- 2) before their story (their perception of what is happening), has been listened to in detail. When the timing is off, attempts at distraction can make a person feel rushed, invalidated and upset as we see in the following contrasting examples.

**Examples of “distracting too soon” versus “distracting in a timely way”**

***Scenario:** A lady with dementia has been living in a care home for several years. Her son is visiting. She tells him she wants to prune the roses in the garden. She has forgotten that she no longer has her own home and garden. He wants her to understand that she doesn’t have a garden anymore and to focus on doing something else – as soon as possible.*

<b>Distracting too soon</b>
<p>Lady I’ve done enough sitting around. Let’s prune my roses; they’ll need doing again.            Son You don’t have any roses.            Lady What are you talking about? – I always look after the roses.            Son Mum, you haven’t got a garden anymore. You’re in a care home now. Right here.            Lady Since when don’t I have a garden anymore?            Son Since you moved into this place. They have a gardener here and they don’t need you to help.            Lady You obviously don’t want to help me, so I’ll do it on my own.            Son Let’s do something we can both do together. Let’s have a coffee in the café downstairs.            Lady Do some gardening first so you earn your coffee.            Son There’s no gardening to do here. Do you want to go for a drive?            Lady I don’t want to go for a drive - just so you can be lazy.            Son You’re being unreasonable Mum. You can’t do your suggestion. I’ve made two suggestions and you’re not interested in either of them. What else can we do?            Lady Maybe you can help me walk to the garden and leave me there to do my work.            Son Let’s have some refreshments – I’m thirsty.            Lady I’m not. [AND SO FORTH till the son ends his visit early, and leaves feeling badly.]</p>
<b>Distracting after validating feelings and listening to a person’s story (and not correcting ‘incorrect facts’)</b>
<p>Lady I’ve done enough sitting around. Let’s prune my roses; they’ll need doing.            Son You want to do some work?            Lady Yes. The garden doesn’t look after itself you know.            Son You’re full of energy and want to go outside?</p>

Lady Yes. There's no time like the present, and it's good weather.

Son Yes, it looks lovely outside. What else were you wanting to do, besides the roses?  
Did you have any ideas how I can help?

Lady I'm not sure. I haven't thought about it.

Son I've got a pencil and paper. Let's think about what needs doing in the garden  
and write it down.

Lady That's a good idea.

Son Let's sit down over there, have a cup of something and make a plan.

Lady..Very good.

Son...What would you like to drink?

Lady Whatever you're having.

*[While they have their drinks and biscuits, the son writes a list of typical things that need doing in a garden, such as – watering, mowing, weeding, pruning (the hedges, and flowers), replanting, fertilizing, picking flowers. His mum seems pleased.*

*They continue and make a list about the preparations needed - gardening gloves, hats, sunscreen, secateurs, watering cans, gardening twine, a refuse bag.*

*His mother is immersed in the conversation and list-making. Though still on the subject of gardening, she becomes distracted from the idea of 'pruning her roses'. The son decides this is a good time to try to go for a walk in the gardens. HE introduces this idea to see if she will follow him.]*

Son Shall we step outside and have a look at the gardens?

Lady Yes, let's go and have a look.

Son I wonder if we could pick a little bouquet to go on the table.

Lady That sounds like a lovely idea. Come on.

#### **Distract - Communication Option 4**

There are *many* ways to distract someone, to deliberately contribute to shifting someone's attention – hopefully without their noticing. (Note that this is different than using 'the art of persuasion' - where you try to gently shift or expand someone's focus of attention, or attachment to their position - but with their knowledge.) We seem to get better at distraction and persuasion with age - as we learn to accurately identify what another person's focus of attention is, and to follow the shifts in attention that they make.

#### **Shifting the person's focus of attention**

When we are *immersed* in something, really paying attention to something, we can lose awareness of the passing of time, and even miss obvious things going on around us. (This is true for vision and our other senses.) Researchers have found that that we can be more easily distracted and fooled than we think.

#### **We are all distractable. When *does* and *doesn't* our attention work?**

There is some famous research about attention. You may have seen the video, that was made of a basketball game. The basketball players were concentrating so hard on the game, that they do not notice an adult person, wearing an ape costume, walking around the court. Afterwards, the players were asked if they noticed the ape. None had. They denied this could have happened, until they were shown the videotape evidence.

You can see a recreation of this experiment, by Daniel Simons, one of the original researchers. It's called "The Monkey Business Illusion". His latest book is called 'The invisible gorilla'. See [www.theinvisiblegorilla.com](http://www.theinvisiblegorilla.com).

Magicians, slight-of-hand specialists, and illusionists are masters of the science of mis-directing our attention (pickpockets and crooks also). But such skills lie outside the norm in that they require very good dexterity and much practise.

### **What situations might we want to distract people with dementia from?**

Some situations that you may have experienced or heard about include trying to distract a person from:

- a repeated question that they cannot seem to stop asking, (e.g. Where am I? What am I supposed to do now? When can we go home? Who is coming?)
- worrying about a given issue (like - thinking they need to feed their children, not understanding their finances, asking about who is living in their house)
- continuing to experience an uncomfortable mood or emotion (anxiety, fear, sadness, boredom, loneliness, anger)
- noticing the *exit door* (to a building, home, daycare, care home) when there is no one to accompany them to go outdoors
- potentially dangerous situations – ones that a person cannot problem-solve
- approaching a person with whom they've had previous altercations (possibly someone who is in a different stage of dementia than the one they are in)
- eating food that is inappropriate or unsafe for them
- insight into the fact that some activities are now beyond their current abilities
- a repeated behaviour (e.g., endless walking, such that a person does not sit to eat meal; stripping all the bedsheets off the bed whenever they are in the bedroom - such that the mattress is exposed when it's time to sleep; packing up cases and bags full of clothing and belongings, in preparation to 'move home' again).

### **Direct and indirect distraction methods**

For this TAD, concerning the care for people with dementia, there are **two types of distraction to consider** - direct and indirect distraction.

*Direct distraction* is where you deliberately change something (some topic or stimulus), with the hope that the person follows your lead, and leaves their train-of-thought behind. *Indirect distraction* is where you remove your visible and/or verbal presence from the person, for a short while, hoping that they will distract themselves in the interim. When you return, you try to follow their lead.

### **Direct distraction**

We can be distracted through any of our senses, thoughts, dreams, and emotions. To help others we can:

- Change the topic or make some sort of comment to try to re-direct a person's attention to something else. (E.g., This is usually easy to do when walking with a person. "Let's see if the painter has finished his work yet.")
- Use a stimulus or activity to distract a person. (E.g., such as showing the person an object, putting on music, offering refreshments, changing location, offering an activity)
- Start a conversation to change the emotional tone in the room
- Ask a question, related to the person's current train of thought (as in the previous example).  
Would you like to go for a walk, or sit down somewhere, so you can tell me more about it?  
Would you like me to write it down while we have [some tea] and think about it?

### **Pointing and speaking at the same time**

**This technique** usually works well on everyone - however it's effect may be only short-lived if someone is distressed.

"Look over there - at that (cobweb, painting, whatever....)!"

"Oh my goodness, she's so fast - looks like she's (training for the Olympics...)"

"Look over there – that's the dinner trolley arriving."

"Can you see Mr X? He's washing his car – even in this weather."

### **Talk about what is happening – right in front of you**

- Do you hear that sound?
- Do you smell that too?
- Do you feel how (hot, cold, soft, prickly) that is?
- Do you taste how (sweet, savoury, sour, salty, tasty) that (whatever) is?
- Did you see how (dark, stormy, colourful, blue, bright) the sky is?

### **Indirect distraction**

Before you leave the person for a while, in the hope the person distracts themselves onto another thought, look at what is present in the environment. If there is little in it, to look at or to do, chances are the person will not be as easily distracted as if there is.

Over the years I've helped plan and install many small 'niche activity areas' in care homes, especially for people in Behavioural Stage 2 – (permanently disoriented in time). The purpose was to entice people to become engaged in familiar activities as they were walking around – especially people who were disoriented, lost and worried <sup>5</sup>. These niche areas have included such things as:

- **An activity table** with visible shelving nearby: the shelving containing things like - a selection of trays, board games, newspapers, dominos, baskets of items for looking at or sorting (e.g., filled with doilies, scarves, costume jewelry, small pieces of wood, models, postcards, playing cards)
- **A laundry folding and ironing area:** with a small table, wall mounted shelf, an ironing board, iron (with the cord cut off), laundry baskets – one empty and one full of tea-towels, handkerchiefs, and doll cloths
- **An office-like work area:** with a desk, filing container, typewriter, desk lamp, pens, ruler, paper, and a bookshelf – filled with a set of encyclopedias and other substantial-looking books. (Such an area has been helpful to settle down some gentlemen who had done office-based work in the past (doctors, accountants, engineers, clerks, managers, administrators). In the care home setting - unaware of their age, and, that they were not working anymore - some were uncomfortable being around so many 'old ladies' in the living-room spaces. They were however, content to join the ladies for refreshments, during what they perceived to be a deserved 'work-break'.)

Note – people only use such spaces for a while. They tend to share them with people who are in the same stage as them.

### **Example; a gentleman was distracted by being kept occupied with tasks**

I was surprised to hear how the wife of a gentleman with vascular dementia,

worked out how to keep him occupied and distracted from frustration throughout the day. Her ideas were somewhat like the ones just mentioned, but in this instance, the niche areas were in their own home.

*She explained her strategy like this. "We don't have confrontations. His fear and worry about his memory wouldn't be helped by that. We try to start and end the day happy.... The thing that causes him most worry is that he sees me doing so much of the housework, and he wants to help, even though he cannot do things the way he used to anymore, without making mistakes, becoming muddles, and upset."*

She selected a few activities, always ready to hand, so that there was always something he could do - and it wouldn't matter if they weren't 'done well' - or if there were accidents. With this plan, she reckoned that neither of them would ever have to become upset.

Besides inviting her husband to fold the laundry and bring it upstairs to the bedroom for her (so she could put it away in the *right* places when he wasn't there), she prepared the following tasks for him.

- **sweeping the pathway in the garden** (She had a bag of leaves prepared so she could scatter them out deliberately, for him to tidy. She also had a brightly coloured rake, gardening gloves, and the wheelbarrow standing beside the path, ready for use, so everything was ready to go.)

- **making 'starter logs' for the fire-place** (In the shed, she had piles of newspapers, that could be rolled up and then tied. The unrolled newspapers were in one crate. A few 'sample logs', to help remind him of what to do, were in another crate. The scissors and twine to bind the newspapers with, were in a container beside the crates.)

[She explained that this third task was not as 'big an issue' for her as most people thought it was - given that it made her husband happiest of all. She just thought of the hallway as being 'his space'.]

- **painting and repainting the front hallway** (She had a good supply of tins of paint, which were inexpensive when 'colour errors' had been made. Every few weeks he repainted the hallway. She let him choose the colour, and kept the box of sheets, tray, and brushes there - in full view. He was pleased to be helping her with what he thought of as *significant* household maintenance jobs.)

#### **Did she have any other distraction methods?**

*"If there's an urgent situation, I ask him if he'd like some ice-cream – that's his favourite. Or else, to come outside and do some gardening with me, or even to look at and sort photographs. They work well too."*

As people progress in their dementia, it becomes easier to distract them. However, anyone who is feeling threatened, becomes very focussed on protecting themselves, - or will try to resolve the threatening situation, in whatever way they can, with whatever 'thing abilities' they have.

#### **What makes people remain very focused and resistant to distraction?**

Our strongest emotions, the primary emotions of fear and anger, (as well as physical pain), can keep us focussed on what we are thinking about. When we feel we are in a crisis, we cannot be distracted until **the feeling of the crisis** has passed. This is also true for people with dementia, whose reference points for stabilizing and keeping them oriented to 'person, place, time and context', can

change rapidly and often. So much so, that it is easy for bystanders not to notice what is happening to them.

So, until these strong emotions have been expressed, or the perception of the situation has been discussed and/or alleviated – it can sometimes be very difficult to distract a person.

Such situations require us to listen carefully to a person's story (or their perspective on what's happening), to be patient (expect repetitions), and to remain calm and present.

In a later TAD newsletter, ideas for “replying to frequently repeated issues and questions” will be discussed.

The next TAD covers Option 5 – ‘play along with’.

In the meanwhile,  
Best regards,

Gemma Jones

## References

- 1 Jones, GMM (2021) TAD 67, 17 Mar., The 'Ten-plus communication options model for dementia-care. TAD newsletter. Sent out by TheWideSpectrum.co.uk, pp8
- 2 Jones, GMM (2021) TAD 68, 18 Apr., The 'Ten-plus communication options model' – Option 1: Gather more information, ask 'good' questions. Sent out by TheWideSpectrum.co.uk, pp10
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- 4 Jones, GMM (2021) TAD 70, 05 July., The 'Ten-plus communication options model' – Option3: Reminisce. TAD newsletter. Sent out by TheWideSpectrum.co.uk, pp6.
- 5 Jones GMM (2009) The 'Ten Plus Communication Options Model' (pg 208), in Chapter 10, 'Activities and pastimes', of the Course Notes Book for the course “Communication and caregiving in dementia: A positive vision”, (pp 149-171) by GMM Jones. The Wide Spectrum Pubs., Sunninghill, Berks, UK, SL5 7BH

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