

## JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

# How to Communicate With People Suffering From Dementia

Anne Basting says the key is to not ask questions that force those with Alzheimer's to remember facts. Instead, focus on creative and emotional communication.



Research by Prof. Anne Basting is helping families of Alzheimer's patients engage again with their loved ones using storytelling, song and other arts.

PHOTO: PENN CHAN

*By Carol Hymowitz*

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One of the most painful parts about caring for somebody with Alzheimer's disease is the feeling that communication with that person is impossible.

Anne Basting believes that it doesn't have to be that way. The problem, she says, is the *way* we try to communicate. By using storytelling, theater, music and other arts, she believes, caregivers and family members can "invite what's still there rather than get stuck on what's missing."

Dr. Basting, who has a Ph.D. in theater arts, is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and founder of TimeSlips, a nonprofit that has trained more than 1,000 people in 49 states and 23 countries to engage creatively with older people. She

describes her approach in her new book, “Creative Care: A Revolutionary Approach to Dementia and Elder Care.” She spoke to The Wall Street Journal about her work. Here are edited excerpts.

**WSJ:** *What is it about the arts that can pierce the barrier of communication?*

**DR. BASTING:** People living with symptoms of dementia may not be able to access rational language or answer questions that require them to remember facts. But with storytelling, song and other arts, you are shifting to emotional communication. You’re inviting people to use imagination as a language and encouraging them to express themselves freely without worrying about right or wrong answers to questions. For people who’ve been shut down, the arts can be a lifeline, an invitation back into the world. We need the arts to be poured into the water of our healthcare system.

**WSJ:** *Why is the more conventional approach to conversation, which focuses on memories or current events, the wrong approach?*

**DR. BASTING:** When you’re engaging with someone with dementia or Alzheimer’s disease, the common impulse is to help them remember. But if someone can’t access memories, this approach underscores their loss and makes them feel ashamed. If instead you invite the person into the moment with an open-ended question—“How do you greet someone you love?”—there are a thousand possible answers, and you open the possibility for connection and expression. These questions, what I call beautiful questions, focus on the present and engage the senses.

**WSJ:** *Was there a moment when you realized the potential of using imagination and the arts to connect with people with Alzheimer’s and dementia?*

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*What suggestions do you have in communicating with people who have dementia? Join the conversation below.*

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**DR. BASTING:** I was in graduate school and volunteering at a nursing home, trying to get residents to talk to me. For weeks, all I got was silence. Then, one day, I brought in a picture of a cowboy, held it up and asked, “What do you want to call this guy?” And someone said “Fred,” and I said, “Fred who?” And someone else said “Fred Astaire.” When I asked, “where do you want him to live?” someone said “Oklahoma.” And then

another resident lifted her head from her lap and began singing, “Oklahoma, where the wind comes sweeping down the plain,” and we went on from there for 45 minutes. When I thought people were losing track, I repeated what they’d said and another wave of creativity occurred. I witnessed an awakening—and since then I’ve been doing this process and teaching it to others.

**WSJ:** *Have you encountered resistance?*

**DR. BASTING:** Yes, at times. A classic example is we’ll be working with people in a day-care or nursing center and their adult children will say, “My father is very serious, and he’s not going to play this silly storytelling game.” Then they watch as their father sings and finds joy in having the chance to play with language, to be funny and interact with others.

**WSJ:** *Can you share what you achieved with your “I Won’t Grow Up Project”?*

**DR. BASTING:** For two years just before the pandemic, I worked with 12 nursing homes in rural Kentucky. We collaborated with staff, residents, family members, local artists and volunteers, doing workshops to reimagine the story of Peter Pan. This pulled residents out of their beds and rooms and brought out the creative spirit of the staff—and eventually we staged an original play and invited in people from the community to see the performance. It was powerful seeing a stigmatized place become a cultural center where people were clamoring for tickets.

**WSJ:** *How can individual caregivers at home put your ideas into practice?*

**DR. BASTING:** Ask open-ended questions like “What do you see?” and emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers. Echo their words back to them and ask if you’re getting it right. The most important thing to remember is that every person has the capacity to imagine and be creative throughout life, to the very end. You just have to figure out what strengths they have left and share their sense of discovery so it’s joyful for you both. I once asked a man who had no language left, “Can you show me how water moves?” He danced for about half an hour.

**WSJ:** *You write in your book about your mother recently developing Alzheimer’s. Has your work helped your father care for her?*

**DR. BASTING:** My dad reads all my work and uses beautiful questions with my mom. He once asked her “Are you hungry?” when she asked, a few hours after they’d gone out to

dinner with friends, whether she should set the table. He didn't shut her down by saying "Don't you remember?"

**WSJ:** *During the Covid pandemic, older people, especially those in nursing homes, were isolated. What do you hope for now?*

**DR. BASTING:** We owe nursing homes, whose residents suffered 23% of Covid deaths, our commitment. We need to make them places where family members and volunteers want to come, out of interest instead of guilt and fear. And we need to ensure that older people in our communities have meaning and purpose in their lives. During the pandemic, we solicited responses of elders in Milwaukee to questions delivered to them by Meals on Wheels drivers and other volunteers—questions like, "What's something you treasure in your home?" and then we had an exhibit of what we'd collected at City Hall.

**WSJ:** *Can your approach change how we perceive aging and help people who don't have dementia?*

**DR. BASTING:** Traditionally we've seen aging as a time of overwhelming losses, instead of a time when, despite losses, there's also growth. Creative engagement can promote growth and ease loneliness for people of all ages. Young people who just get dropped into a nursing home are likely to run out screaming, but those who join our theater performances and other programs keep coming back.

*Ms. Hymowitz is a writer in New York. She can be reached at [reports@wsj.com](mailto:reports@wsj.com).*

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