

Communication Skills

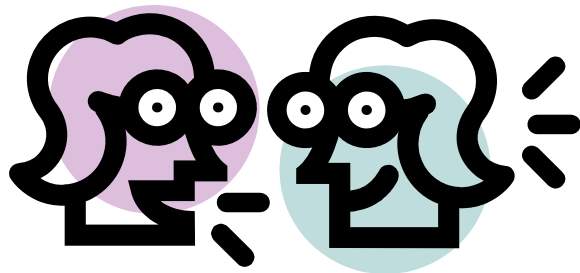
COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Connecticut Community Care, Inc. Self-Directed Support Services

The preparation of this document was financed under an agreement with the Connecticut Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Getting Started

Good communication is required in order for you and your personal care assistant to have a positive working relationship. In order to do this, however, you should be familiar with your own personality and expectations. This will help to create a positive relationship right from the start. This should also include knowing how to maintain boundaries and how to give constructive criticism when necessary. In order to do all this, you must know yourself and build upon your own communication skills. This tip sheet will give you information you need to be an employer that communicates well with all of their personal care assistants, treating everyone equal, and building upon individual skills.



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Understanding Your Personality

Being an effective employer begins with having a clear understanding of your personality. We each have our own style of doing things. Once you have an understanding of who you are, you can also adjust your personality to develop a positive relationship with your personal care assistant. An employer that works well with their employees is assertive. This means you are comfortable with your own values, but you are also open to feedback. You also know when to be assertive, and when not to be. This takes practice, and will become easier over time. Being honest with your feelings is most important. Become familiar with the ways your personal care assistants learn so you can maximize their skills.

Communicating Your Needs

The relationship between you and your personal care assistant is a unique one. The relationship you have is a very personal one due to the tasks they support you with. This can become complicated at times, which is why it is important you maintain boundaries and provide feedback as needed. Having a positive working relationship is possible with communication.

Since the employer–employee relationship is so unique between you and your personal care assistant, maintaining boundaries is difficult when a situation occurs. There are steps you can take to work through a difficult situation. These steps include the following:

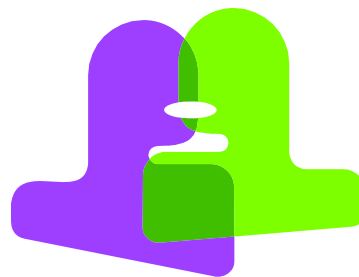
- ☑ Discuss the behavior you find unacceptable;
- ☑ Ask your personal care assistant to change her behavior;
- ☑ Explain what will happen if the behavior does not change;

The relationship between you and your personal care assistant is a unique one. Maintaining boundaries and giving feedback will help to strengthen this relationship.

- ☑ If the behavior continues, remind your personal care assistant what will happen if the behavior continues;
- ☑ If your personal care assistant does not change, follow through on what you said will occur.

These steps can be difficult, especially if you are new to hiring employees. It's okay to ask for help, and practice what you will say with someone you feel comfortable with. If you are planning on giving feedback, make sure it is a good time for both you and your personal care assistant. Also make sure you have enough time to discuss the behavior. Your personal care assistant should also have an opportunity to give feedback. The most important thing to remember is to stay calm throughout the conversation.

Remember, the more you communicate with your employee, the better your relationship will be.



How to Respond to Communication Challenges

Being clear will help you develop a positive working relationship with your personal care assistants. At times we may take for granted that a personal care assistant will understand what we want and need without being clear.

► Challenge 1 – Listen more carefully and responsively.

If you listen to someone else and acknowledge what they are saying, they will be more willing to listen to you, even if you disagree. This will go a long way towards resolving issues before they become conflicts. Here is an example of a common situation that may occur with a personal care assistant:

Situation: Your personal care assistant comes into work 45 minutes late for the fifth time, saying that he was held up in traffic. This occurred all within the last two weeks, and it is making it difficult to complete the tasks and personal care you need for that evening.

Negative Response: You are late now for the fifth time in the last two weeks, and I am not getting done what needs to get done. You need to leave earlier so you will be here on time from now on. If you know there is already traffic that time of day, you need to plan better. You really need to start being on time from now on. Okay?

Positive Response: It sounds like it is difficult for you to balance all you need to do before you come to work. When there is traffic, it affects your ability to get here on time. However, this also affects what I need to complete before you leave for the evening, and does not provide me with enough time for the things that are important to my day-to-day life. I understand your pressure for time, but is there a way we can work this out so that I can also receive the support I need, as well as what you may need?

Being able to acknowledge each other's feelings will help resolve future situations.

► Challenge 2 – Explain the intent of your conversation and welcome consent.

The more you involve the other person prior to beginning a conversation, the more willing they may be to spend time talking with you. Many people prefer to know that a conversation needs to occur on a particular topic, rather than having it sprung on them. Here is an example of how to state your intent and invite consent:

How to Respond to Communication Challenges Continued

Positive Statement: “Hi Mary, I would like to talk to you about your scheduled hours to work this month, and make sure this works for both of us. Do you have a few minutes now before we become too involved in the work we need to complete today?”

This type of statement addresses several areas that are important to positive communication between you and your personal care assistant:

It gives your personal care assistant the opportunity to agree to or decline communication, making him or her feel more invested in a conversation.

It provides the personal care assistant with information about the topic of conversation.

It enables your personal care assistant to prepare for the conversation, especially if it is an emotional topic.

It informs the personal care assistant about what his or her role is in the conversation.

► **Challenge 3 – Express yourself more clearly and completely.**

Sharing what you are feeling and thinking with your personal care assistant will enable them to become more involved in a conversation and to gain a better understanding of a topic. Using “I” statements is very important.

► **Challenge 4 – Translate your (and other people’s) complaints and criticisms into specific requests, and explain your requests.**

It is important to use detailed action-oriented and positive statements, rather than general statements. The clearer you are in what you say or request, the more likely a response will have a positive outcome. Here are some examples of a response that is too general, and a response that will provide you with a better outcome.

Generalized Statement: “The refrigerator is full of food that has gone bad, and it’s difficult for me to fit any more food on the shelves right now until it’s cleaned out.”

Positive Request: “From what I can see, there is a lot of food in the refrigerator that needs to be cleaned out. Before we can go shopping, this would be a good time for us to clean it out. Would you please help me clean it out now?”

As you can see from the two statements above, the first sentence is not giving the personal care assistant any direction. The next statement clearly states a request,

How to Respond to Communication Challenges Continued

and when it should be completed. Giving clear requests will result in more tasks being completed as needed. In addition, by not being detailed with your request, you open up the possibility to a future conflict. For example, if the refrigerator in the example is not cleaned out and there is no room to store the food from your groceries this could create an argument. Avoid any negative issues, and be direct with your requests.

► Challenge 5 – Ask open-ended questions.

Asking open-ended questions creates more of an opportunity for a detailed response, instead of the typical yes / no response. The more dialogue in a conversation, the more likely it is that something will be understood. This leads to fewer assumptions and misunderstandings, and creates a more positive interaction. Here is an example of how to ask an open-ended question rather than a yes / no question:

Yes / No Response – “Do you know how to cook?”

Open-ended Question – “What are some of your specialties that you enjoy cooking?”

The open-ended question not only tells you whether they know how to cook, but also what they enjoy cooking. This is important if you are trying to plan out a menu for your dinner times during the week, but do not know what your assistant can cook. Being able to cook, and being able to cook the things you will enjoy eating could be different.

► Challenge 6 – Express appreciation often.

In our busy lives, we may take for granted all that our personal care assistants do for us on a day to day basis. It is easy to forget to say “thank you,” but those two words are so important in building a positive relationship. Appreciation also helps to build a relationship that can survive disagreements or differences. Look for things you are grateful for and express your appreciation. This helps others to see how important they are to you. Some examples of ways to say thank you may be as follows:

“I am so happy you are here. Thank you!”

“I am sure it must have been difficult coming to work this morning with the awful cold you have. Thank you for coming to work.”

How to Respond to Communication Challenges Concluded

“You are terrific at helping me clean my house so well. Thank you for all you do.”

A “thank you” can go a long way, and help to increase job performance. A happy Employee is a good employee!

- ▶ **Challenge 7** – Improving your communication skills as a part of your every day life. The more you practice effective communication, the easier it will become. Practice makes perfect!



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Source: *CT CPASS: You are the Employer: A Guide to Hiring and Managing Personal Assistant Services*. Adapted and printed with permission from University of Connecticut A.J. Pappanikou Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service

Frequently Asked Questions

New employers often wonder whether it's appropriate to be friends with an employee, and how to manage the personal relationship. Frequently asked questions based on other employers who have experience hiring and managing personal care assistants. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer to each question because everyone is different. These answers will provide you with a good starting point to help you determine what works best for you.

▶ **Is it okay to also be friends with your personal care assistant?**

Because of the personal nature of the work a personal care assistant does, it would be unfair to think that a close relationship is not formed. There is, however, a difference between being a friend and being an employer, and it is important this is clear to both of you. Talk about it openly with your personal care assistant because more than likely it is also difficult for them to draw a line. Some employers and their personal care assistants develop an understanding that when they are friends, they are off the clock, and that both of you should be sensitive to this. At the same time, it is not appropriate to pay your personal care assistant to be your friend. When they are on the clock they need to be sensitive to the fact they are working with you.

Some employer–employee relationships may find it difficult to develop a clear set of boundaries. This is especially true if you are new to the experience of hiring and managing personal care assistants. If you are not sure how to work through this situation, ask others you may know who have similar experiences or talk through the situation with someone in your life.

▶ **How do I handle the situation when a personal care assistant keeps saying that another assistant is “my favorite” and I don’t treat them the same?**

This can be a difficult situation, especially if the reality is that you are treating all of your assistants equally. One way to handle this is to talk with your personal care assistant about why they feel another assistant is a favorite and that they are treated differently. Also, you may want to be sure you are expressing your appreciation because they may feel that they are not appreciated. Explain that everyone that works with you is unique, and each one brings something different that you like about them – whether it is a good sense of humor, being caring, organized, fun to be around, etc. Also be careful not to create any situations where you do have “a favorite” assistant. This can create obstacles and problems for you with your other personal care assistants.

Frequently Asked Questions Continued

- ▶ **My personal care assistant thinks that since we are friends she does not have to do something she does not want to. What do I do?**

It is very important that you set clear boundaries with each other from the very beginning because there is a difference between what a friend may do to help you and what an employee will do (e.g. friends do not necessarily do windows). If you ask them to do something, make sure you are clear. If they refuse, explain to them that this is part of their job as your personal care assistant. Sit down together and discuss boundaries for when they are a personal care assistant and when they are a friend.

- ▶ **Is it okay to give my personal care assistants gifts or tokens of appreciation?**

People are always grateful when you show appreciation in some way. Some people may enjoy giving a gift to say thank you or saying how much you care, but a gift is not required. Some people may provide verbal gifts, make something specifically for the other person, send an e-card on the computer “just because” or take the other person out to dinner or somewhere fun for the day. Regardless of what you do, a thank you goes a long way.

- ▶ **Is it okay to go out socially with my personal care assistant? How do I handle this?**

Of course there may be times you want to do something socially with your personal care assistant. You may want to discuss whether or not the social event you are attending is on the clock or off the clock. This will determine whether or not they are attending as a friend or personal care assistant.

- ▶ **When is it appropriate and not necessary for me to pay for meals or other social activities we do together?**

If you are attending a social activity or going out to eat when the personal care assistant is on the clock and working, it is usually appropriate for you to pay for meals and social activities since they are going as part of their job. If you are both going out socially as friends and they are not on the clock, then you are not usually required to pay for any meals or social activities unless you decide you want to.

Frequently Asked Questions Concluded

► **Is it appropriate or necessary to provide my personal care assistants with meals and snacks?**

It is not necessary that you provide your personal care assistants with meals or snacks, but it is important to be sensitive to what they may need, particularly if they are working when people typically eat lunch or dinner. If you would rather not provide them with a meal or snacks, it is a good idea to give them time for a break where they can eat or drink something. Think about how you would want to be treated if you are in their shoes. At the same time, do not let your assistant take advantage of you by eating food without your permission or if you do not offer them something. Expectations can create problems. It is also important that if you do offer a meal or snack, that you are consistent with what you decide to do. This will also help to prevent problems from occurring in the future.

► **Should I provide my personal care assistant with a break during their scheduled work time?**

It is probably unlikely that you and your personal care assistant work consistently throughout every minute of the time they are scheduled to work with you. However, too much of a break from work can also be a problem. Make sure you set the pace and determine what tasks need to be accomplished during each shift. You should be able to accomplish what you need. If this is not occurring, it is necessary for you to address it immediately with your assistant to prevent further problems. If a personal care assistant is working a long shift, you should be aware of when a break is needed.



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