

MDS Alert

Reader Question: Use These Tips for Interactions with PPE

Question: I work with residents with dementia and residents who are hard of hearing. Body language and touch have been the foundation of my care relationships with these folks. I'm really struggling to communicate my compassion in the same way while wearing personal protective equipment (PPE). How can I utilize body language through the barriers of gloves and mask?

Virginia Subscriber

Answer: Everyone who provides direct care in healthcare right now is dealing with this problem, even if they don't realize it. **Mathias Schlögl, MD, MPH**, of University Hospital Zurich in Zurich, Switzerland, and **Christopher A. Jones, MD, MBA**, of University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, advise people who work with elderly folks - a relationship that has inherent power dynamic differentials - to consider carefully how they communicate.

"It is important that we think about the ways that we typically communicate, in gesture and tone, when not constrained by distance and personal protective equipment. Once we become more aware of our characteristic gestures and body language, we can then go about aligning our nonverbal signaling with our spoken message," they say, in a letter to the editor published in the Journal of American Geriatrics Society, Volume 68, No. 5.

Remain calm, move slowly, and drop down to the resident's eye level, too. "Since a person with dementia will be able to detect your body language, sudden movements can cause distress on the person and can make it hard to communicate," Schlögl and Jones say.

Both folks who have dementia and folks who cannot hear well may rely on lip reading, to some degree. Use short, simple sentences and accompany your words with gestures when possible, making sure to pause after asking a question or making a statement, they say. Speak loudly, if necessary, but use a gentle tone.