



Activity 3 - Enhancing empathy to overcome communication barriers and support emotional expression in patients with neurological conditions like Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis

**DOCUMENT PRODUCED BY:
ROMANIAN ALZHEIMER SOCIETY**

Active learning activity – description

Module	Module 1. The main mental health disorders in old age (cognitive decline, dementia and Alzheimer disease, other neurological disorders – e.g. multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease): symptoms, warning signs, stages
Chapter	Other neurological disorders
Name of activity	Enhancing empathy to overcome communication barriers and support emotional expression in patients with neurological conditions like Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis
OBJECTIVE(S)	Help participants develop empathy and communication skills, learning how to overcome communication barriers, express emotions in a healthy way and support emotional expression in patients with neurological conditions like Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis.
METHODS	The workshop utilizes pantomime, nonverbal communication, and guided discussion to enhance participants' understanding of empathy and communication strategies when interacting with individuals who have Parkinson's Disease or multiple sclerosis. This methodology is designed to be flexible and adaptable for both online and in-person formats, ensuring accessibility and engagement for all participants.
TIME ALLOCATED	40 minutes
RESOURCES NEEDED	Space for movement Emotion cards (cards with different emotions written on them) Timer Role-play scenarios

	<p>Webinar platforms (e.g. Microsoft teams, zoom, google meet)</p> <p>Notebooks or flipchart for group observations and conclusions</p>
INSTRUCTIONS*	<p>Introduction</p> <p>Emotional Awareness Exercise</p> <p>Role Play Exercise – Overcoming Communication Barriers</p> <p>Empathic Communication Techniques</p> <p>Closing Exercise and Reflection</p>
REFERENCES	
HANDOUTS	<p>Emotion cards (cards with different emotions written on them)</p> <p>Quick scenarios for Emotion Recognition</p> <p>Role-play scenarios</p>

* Full instructions:

Enhancing empathy to overcome communication barriers and support emotional expression in neurological conditions like Parkinson’s disease and multiple sclerosis

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

Theme Presentation:

The facilitator explains the importance of empathy in social interactions, especially in the context of communicating with people who have difficulty expressing emotions.

Empathy is crucial for connecting with others, especially when communicating with people who may struggle to express their emotions. By putting ourselves in their shoes, we open a path for deeper understanding, patience, and support. This workshop will explore how empathy can help us overcome communication barriers, allowing us to build stronger, more meaningful relationships.

Opening Question:

"What does empathy mean to you, and how do you think it can influence relationships with people experiencing the challenges of neurological conditions like Parkinson's or MS?"

2. Emotional Awareness Exercise (10 minutes)

Emotion Cards Distribution:

Each participant receives cards with different emotions (e.g., frustration, sadness, confusion, joy, fear).

Quick Scenarios:

The facilitator reads several brief scenarios related to interactions with people with Parkinson's or MS.

Examples of scenarios:

Symptom	Scenario	Emotion
Tremor-Induced Insecurity	During a family dinner, the individual tries to use a spoon but keeps spilling their food.	Embarrassment and insecurity as they notice others watching.
Chronic fatigue and Emotional Numbness	The patient explains to a friend, "I'm so tired all the time that I can't even feel excited or happy about things anymore."	Numbness and apathy, where constant exhaustion dulls their ability to engage with life and relationships.
Physical weakness	The patient struggles to put on a shirt by themselves and, feeling exhausted, sighs, "I don't see the point in even trying anymore" then repeatedly apologizes to their daughter, saying, "I'm sorry for being a burden."	Sense of defeat and loss of motivation as once-simple tasks become overwhelming.
Speech Struggle and Isolation	The person attempts to share a story with friends, but their words come out	Sadness, and a sense of isolation.

	slowly, and people struggle to understand.	
Muscle Rigidity and Dependence	Trying to reach for a glass on a high shelf, they find their arm won't extend as needed and must ask someone for help. The patient whispers, "Why should I even try? I'm not good for anything anymore."	Loss of independence and slight irritation.
Memory Gaps and Confusion	In the middle of a conversation, they forget what they were talking about and stumble over words.	Confusion and embarrassment.
Loss of Fine Motor Skills	The patient watches someone else perform a simple task like buttoning a shirt and mutters, "I used to do that without a second thought. It's just not fair."	Resentment and envy, missing the ease with which they once performed everyday tasks.
Difficulty Swallowing	At a restaurant, the person chokes on their food briefly, which draws concerned	Embarrassment and anxiety.

	looks from others at the table.	
Chronic fatigue	The patient shares their excitement about a new supplement they hope will boost their energy, saying, "Maybe this will finally give me the strength to do more!"	Optimism and hope that new treatments might help them regain some independence.
Chronic illness fatigue	The patient notices the caregiver looks tired and says, "I know it's hard for you too. I'm sorry you have to go through this."	Mutual empathy and compassion, recognizing the shared toll of the disease on relationships and daily life.

Examples of Emotions and Lessons for Participants:

Isolation: The disease can lead to social withdrawal due to difficulty connecting with others. Participants learn how they can offer support and inclusion.

Anger and frustration: These are natural reactions to loss of control. Participants learn not to take these reactions personally and to respond with understanding.

Fear and confusion: Feelings of uncertainty are common and can be managed through clear information and emotional support.

Guilt and shame: Acknowledging and accepting these feelings can help the patient feel more comfortable and valued.

Mutual empathy: Recognize moments when patients show concern for caregivers and respond with appreciation.

Emotion Identification:

After each scenario, participants hold up the emotion card they feel is most relevant to the situation described.

This activity helps participants observe the varied and complex emotions of patients with Parkinson’s and develop empathic strategies for responding in a way that supports open communication and mutual support.

3. Role Play Exercise – Overcoming Communication Barriers (15 minutes)

Communication Scenarios:

Each group of participants receives a scenario that illustrates a communication barrier (e.g., someone who doesn’t feel listened to, someone who is afraid to express feelings of frustration).

Roles:

Participants play the roles of “caregiver” and “person with Parkinson’s or MS” (or others as relevant) to explore how they can overcome communication barriers.

Example Scenarios:

Scenario	Description
Lack of empathy	A person with Parkinson’s feels unheard by their caregiver and emotionally withdraws. The caregiver must express their desire to understand and create a safe space for expressing emotions.
Repeated misunderstandings	A person with MS feels their caregiver doesn’t truly understand what they’re saying due to speech difficulties. The caregiver tries to show patience and adjust their language to improve communication.
Lack of independence	The patient wants to perform certain tasks independently, but the caregiver intervenes each time out of concern for their safety. This frustrates the patient, who withdraws from conversation. The caregiver needs to recognize the patient’s need for independence and negotiate a balance.
Unexpressed feelings	A person with Parkinson’s avoids expressing sadness or worry about the future, not wanting to burden their family. The caregiver encourages them to speak openly and creates a safe space for emotional expression.
Social pressure	The patient refuses to attend a social gathering due to anxiety about possible tremors or speech difficulties. The caregiver needs to show empathy and find ways to reduce anxiety and provide support.

Sudden mood change	One day, the patient is more irritable than usual and rejects help. The caregiver, confused, tries to understand the cause of frustration and offers space for expression.
Need for validation	The person with MS feels discouraged and expresses fear of no longer being useful. The caregiver must validate these feelings and offer genuine encouragement without minimizing the patient’s experiences.
Frustration with physical limitations	The patient feels ashamed and frustrated at difficulties with daily activities. The caregiver, while wanting to help, must find a way to support without increasing feelings of helplessness.
Refusal to accept help	The person with Parkinson’s insists on handling tasks alone but clearly needs assistance. The caregiver must find a way to help without undermining their autonomy.
Need for privacy and confidentiality	The patient wishes to discuss intimate or sensitive issues without the caregiver being too intrusive. The caregiver must respect the patient’s desire to maintain certain boundaries and show they are available to provide support as needed.

Discussion:

After each role play, the group discusses which techniques worked to overcome barriers and facilitate communication.

4. Empathic Communication Techniques (5 minutes)

The facilitator offers several strategies to address communication barriers, including:

Strategy	Description
Active Listening	Be fully attentive to what the other person is saying without interrupting or thinking of responses. This helps the person feel understood and valued.
Open-Ended Questions	Ask questions that encourage the person to express emotions and thoughts (e.g., “How does that make you feel?”).
Emotion Validation	Acknowledge and accept the other person’s feelings without judgment.
Emotion Reflection	Restate or rephrase what the other person has said to show you understand, for example, “From what you’re saying, I understand you feel frustrated because...” This helps confirm feelings and encourages further expression.
Simplified Language	Use short, clear, and direct sentences to avoid confusion and make the conversation easier to follow.

Nonverbal Language Awareness	Observe facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language, which can often convey more about someone’s emotional state than words alone.
Provide Time to Respond	Give the person ample time to respond without pressure, as speech difficulties may make immediate responses challenging.
Clarifying and Paraphrasing	Reformulate unclear statements and ask for confirmation (“So, you meant that...?”) to reduce misunderstandings.
Constructive Self-Disclosure	Encourage openness by modeling honesty. For example, “I know I sometimes seem anxious, but I’m here for you and want to understand.”
Calm and Encouraging Tone	A warm, empathic tone can reduce tension and make the conversation feel more open.

5. Closing Exercise and Reflection (5 minutes)

Sharing Ideas:

Participants discuss lessons learned and how they plan to apply these techniques in their daily relationships.

Reflection Questions:

“How do you feel about expressing your emotions after this workshop?”



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“What concrete steps will you take to improve communication with people in your life?”

Activity Evaluation

Participants can complete a short questionnaire at the end to evaluate what they have learned about empathy and overcoming communication barriers.

Activity Structure (Adapted for Online)

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

Present the theme and opening question via a shared screen. Use the chat for initial reflections.

2. Emotional Awareness Exercise (10 minutes)

Share emotion cards digitally (images or words on a shared slide). Use brief scenarios, encouraging participants to hold up the digital emotion card they feel matches each situation (use Zoom reactions or chat).

3. Role Play Exercise (15 minutes)

Divide participants into breakout rooms. Share a digital document with role-play scenarios.

Participants take turns as “caregiver” and “patient,” discussing their responses in small groups.

4. Empathic Communication Techniques (5 minutes)

Share a slide with strategies and invite participants to comment on which techniques resonate most. Use the chat to discuss practical examples.



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5. Closing Reflection (5 minutes)

Use a poll for final reflections or a chat discussion with final questions.

Online Adaptation Tips

Use virtual whiteboards for group observations.

Share a digital notebook with scenarios and materials before the session.

Encourage the use of reaction emojis for quick, interactive responses during discussions.



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