

Effective Communications with the Elderly

Session Materials

Things to consider:

If you think about your grandparents, great aunts and uncles and the time in which they grew up, their life experiences may be very different than your own. Depending upon their age, they may have grown up in a very different era with different values and traditions, different exposures and experiences and as a result harbor different ideals and expectations, especially involving victimization and criminal activity.

Many may have grown up at a time when respecting your “elders” meant a more formal way of communicating and interacting with people, especially those in authority. As a peace officer, you are in a position of authority, even to your elders.

Many elderly people live isolated and fearful lives. This is often true of persons whose spouses have died. Many communities have outreach services which can help get older people involved in their communities. Victim services can often recommend these services and provide resources and referrals.

Physical changes can affect communications:

Age related declines in physical abilities can make communication more challenging, and some illnesses make communication more difficult. A hearing loss makes you harder to understand, so be patient and speak more clearly. Be sure you face the person when you talk, and avoid talking while eating. Avoid speaking when they or others are also talking.

If talking to an elderly person by phone, ask them whether or not they have an assistive listening device that can improve communications by phone.

Vision loss makes it harder for the elderly person to see you. When possible, find a well lit location in which to speak with an elderly person.

Some elderly people experience changes in speaking ability, and their voices become weaker, or harder to understand. Be patient when listening, and be aware of when the elderly person tires and wants to end the conversation.

More than one contact may be necessary to collect all of the information that you need.

Some age-related memory loss is normal as people grow older, although people experience different degrees of memory loss. Most often, short-term memory is affected, making it harder for an elderly person to remember recent events. Keep this in mind and be patient.



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Allow the elderly person to grieve:

If you are making contact with an elderly person, it may very well be because they have been the victim of a crime. If they have lost their life's savings, been abused by a family member or a care-giver, or had their home burglarized, they may experience sadness, embarrassment, shame and feel humiliated. Whenever possible, do not push them to speak, allow them time to collect themselves and their emotions.

Tips:

- Be respectful. Address the person you are speaking to formally "Mr. Smith, can you tell me what happened?" Often, people who are older than us come from a time where "elders" were always addressed in a formal manner. Until permission to call someone by their first name is given, refrain from doing so.
- Ask one question at a time and allow the person you are speaking to, to think about the question and then answer it. As mentioned earlier, short-term memory problems are common in healthy and alert senior citizens.
- Avoid unnecessary pressure, be patience. Pushing the person to respond quickly may not get you the information that you need.
- Maintain good eye contact. For many, this is simple a sign of respect.
- Whenever possible, find a location that is well lit and quiet to conduct your interview. This will allow the person you are speaking with to hear and see you better.
- If the television or a radio is on, ask if you may turn it off from the person you are speaking with. If the lighting is poor, ask if you may turn on a lamp, so that you may see them better, take notes, etc.
- If the font on your business card is small and difficult to read, write your contact information on a separate piece of paper, large enough, so that it can be easily read after you leave.
- Lastly, don't assume that just because someone is older and or vulnerable that they will have hearing, visual, or memory problems. Be respectful and attentive.
- Above all, courtesy, empathy and kindness should govern your actions.

