



Fact Sheet

Tips on how to interact with people with dementia

- **Dementia is not just about memory loss.** Memory loss may occur in the normal ageing process and is not necessarily a symptom of dementia. When a person has dementia, memory loss is persistent and progressive. The person will experience ongoing changes in their everyday life. Some people with dementia may also lose the ability to identify items, and lose their language skills. For this reason, it is important not to use subtleties in language, as this can be too ambiguous. Be calm, patient, positive and empathetic.
- **Acknowledging a person's emotions is important.** You may not always understand what someone is saying. However, you can acknowledge them by actively listening – this validates what someone is experiencing. Think of this as talking to the person's heart rather than their brain. It is not always about logic.
- **Observing behaviour can tell you a lot.** What you see, rather than hear, can be important in determining the strengths and support needs of each individual.
- **Don't go into 'teacher' mode.** We can sometimes speak to someone with dementia in a 'teacherly' way - giving detailed explanations of the 'where' and 'why' of something. This approach can be perceived as patronising. For example, if a person with dementia places their cup near the edge of a table, suggesting they move it, or simply moving it yourself, may not be the best approach. Instead, you can pick up the cup to admire it, then casually place it back on the table further in from the edge. This is described as 'supporting someone without them knowing'.
- **People with dementia can experience difficulty with spatial awareness.** Some techniques that may help with this include the use of place mats, which create another 'edge'. A placemat in a favourite colour, which attracts a person, can be a good technique.
- **Connect with the person.** Undertake activities that stimulate the senses. Recognise their individuality, personal strengths, abilities, interests and hobbies. It is not about the dementia. Just being with a person is important. Understand that talking can sometimes be overwhelming. Be aware of non-verbal communication.
- **People with dementia will often say it as they see it.** This is not to be nasty. A person with dementia does not have an 'inner voice', and can lose their inhibitions. For this reason, a person with dementia may say things that we all may think, but would never normally say.
- **Be aware of issues with brain function and cognition.** These issues can affect the 'sequencing' of people with dementia. For example, a person with dementia may shuffle because their sequencing has been affected.

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- **Approach situations from the perspective of the person with dementia.** Try to put yourself in that person's shoes.
- **Recognise the person's individuality.** Focus on the person, not the task. Respect their rights, including those of privacy.
- **Maximise independence.** Take every opportunity to maximise the person's independence by encouraging choice and decision-making.
- **Be calm.** Demonstrate a culture of calm and empathy. Try to be patient, and respond with maturity.
- **Develop strategies to support and prompt memory.** Using notes and signs, and having an established routine can be very helpful. Reinforce and support family and social relationships.
- **Avoid asking who people are in photographs.** Instead, comment on how nice the person in the photograph looks. Follow their lead instead of pressuring them to remember.
- **Share observations and insights** with other carers and communicate effectively. Reflect and record any challenging episodes. This can help to establish any patterns of behaviour which may emerge.
- **Look for creative solutions to challenging situations**, and if you are caring for a person with dementia for an extended amount of time, you may find it useful to undertake training and activities to enhance your knowledge and skills in this area.

For more information

- A range of reference material is available from the Resthaven website at: <http://www.resthaven.asn.au/specialised-services/dementia-care/>
- Please visit the Alzheimer's Australia website: <http://www.fightdementia.org.au>