

Talking to Someone With Dementia

- 1. Meet people in the world where they are.** Avoid correcting them or attempting to re-ground them in reality, since this often causes stress, anxiety, and confusion. Correcting them is unlikely to improve their memory. More likely, correcting them will make things worse.

Have patience. It's not the person causing the trouble. It's their disease.

When someone says "I want to see [someone who has died]"

Instead of: "Don't you remember, [that person] is dead."

Say: "Hmmm. Tell me about [that person]" Share joy in sharing memories about them.

Keep asking questions about them. Soon attention will drift to something else.

When paranoia occurs, validate the fear. Listen and nod slowly.

Gently let attention drift to a calmer topic.

Rather than offering reasons why what they fear can't be, say something like:

"Wow that sounds serious. We will for sure take care of that."

If there are serious delusions, for example: something that is seen or heard or smelled which isn't there, say something like:

"I'll take care of that so it won't bother you again." or

"I saw that man, don't worry he's left and gone away."

"You seem out of breath. Come sit next to me" [then change the subject]

'White lies' like this are likely to be calming. Don't worry that they'll reinforce a delusion.

When someone asks the same question or says the same thing over and over, rather than repeatedly answering, engage in a distracting activity to occupy them in some other way.

Don't try to drill memories to try to bring them back. Don't test people to try to maintain their thinking. Exercises like this make people feel bad. (This is why it is often not useful to keep "tracking" someone's decline by repeatedly giving them cognitive tests over time.)

- 2. Keep talking directly to someone with dementia.** Even if the meaning of your words aren't understood, kind emotions are perceived and make a difference. At times people understand more than you think.

There's value in addressing someone directly, even if the meaning of your words is lost.

Be careful that you (and others!) don't talk about the person as if they weren't there.

Even if they don't understand what's said, they may notice it happening, causing distress.

3. If there are aggressive behaviors, stay calm. Often withdrawing and moving them to another room will help. Speak calmly. Gently hold the agitated person's hand.

When these moments of agitation occur, they are more likely to pass quickly if they are met calmly. A stern response will often lead to escalation and more aggression.

Avoid startling or surprising someone. Sometimes aggressive behaviors are a normal defensive reflex triggered by being startled.

4. Keep the home environment simple. Reduce distractions.

Examples: remove throw rugs, cover mirrors which can cause distress and confusion.

If someone with dementia gets alarmed by something they see in a mirror, say "wow, that's strange" then quickly change the subject. Then cover the mirror.

5. Focus on encouragement. Emphasize what people still can do. Not on what's been lost.

Have patience. It's not the person causing problems. It's their disease.

If someone fails trying to do a task, focus on hiding any anger or frustration you may feel. Focus on your empathy for them. Keep their dignity front and center.

Clothing tips: Elastic waist pants avoid buttons or zippers! Lay out an outfit each day.

Keep a pocket sized notebook handy to write things down.

Give someone with dementia a choice between option A or option B. That is less stressful for them than if you ask open-ended questions.

6. Find joy day to day. Listen to music. Do art projects. Go for outside walks. Join support groups, join a program at an adult day center.

If things get very advanced, people are often better off (happier) in a living facility rather than living at home alone without stimulation. (One of the worst requests someone makes, or a promise that a caregiver tries to keep is: "I never want to live or I will never let you live" in a nursing home. Caring for dementia in advanced stages is hard at home. Often people with dementia actually have a much better quality of life in a living facility.