

## Talking to someone living with dementia

- 1. Meet them in the reality where they are.** Rather than correcting someone, listen and nod and move-on. Attempting to correct often causes anxiety and confusion. Correcting probably won't make sense, is often upsetting, and usually doesn't help someone "stay grounded." Instead: be compassionate and supportive and redirect to topics they easily understand.

Example: When someone says "I want to see [name of someone who has died.]"  
Instead of saying: "Don't you remember, [that person] is dead."

Say: "Hmmm. Tell me about [that person]" Share joy in sharing memories about them.  
Ask questions about them. Soon their attention will drift somewhere else.

Example: If paranoia occurs, listen, validate someone's fear, nod slowly, move on.  
Slowly guide someone's attention to a different, calm topic.  
Instead of offering reasons why the thing they fear can't be true, say something like:  
"Wow that sounds serious. We'll get on that. Hey, I really like that shirt you're wearing."

Example: If someone has serious delusions or hallucinations (such as: seeing something or smelling something that isn't there) say something like:  
"I'll take care of that so it won't bother you again." or  
"Don't worry, that person has left and gone away."  
Or "You seem out of breath. Come sit next to me." (Then change the subject.)  
'White lies' like this are often calming. Don't worry they'll reinforce delusions. They are more likely to help someone feel calm. Corrections are unlikely to "fix" the 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 often make people feel bad. (And this is one reason why giving people cognitive tests repeatedly should be avoided unless it's really necessary.)

- 2. Keep talking directly to someone with dementia.** Even if the meaning of your words isn't understood, your kind emotion is perceived and makes a difference. At times people understand more than you think. When you address someone directly, even if the meaning of your words is lost, you are connecting and making them feel included.

Be careful that you (and others) don't talk about the person as if they weren't there. They may notice this happening, which can often cause real distress.

**3. If aggressive behaviors occur, stay calm.** Often withdrawing yourself or moving someone to another room will help. Speak calmly. Gently hold the agitated person's hand.

When moments of agitation occur, they are likely to pass quickly if they are met with calm. A stern response to aggression can often lead to escalation and worsening agitation.

Avoid startling someone, or surprising someone who is living with dementia. Be gentle. Sometimes someone's aggressive response to be startled is just a defensive reflex, that gets triggered if someone is surprised and confused about what is going on.

**4. Keep home environments simple.** Reduce distractions.

Examples: remove throw rugs that could be misperceived as holes in the floor. Cover mirrors that can be misperceived as someone else in the room.

**5. Focus on encouragement.** Emphasize what people still can do, rather than what's been lost.

If someone fails trying to do a task, focus on hiding frustration you may feel. Focus on empathy. Maintain their dignity. Honor that they are a person who deserves respect.

Clothing tip: Elastic waist pants. Avoid buttons and zippers. Lay an outfit out each day.

Keep a pocket-sized notebook at hand to write things down.

Give someone with dementia a choice between option A or option B. This can be less stressful for someone than having to answer an open-ended question.

**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.

As dementia advances, people are often better-off (and happier) in a living facility rather than living at home with less stimulation. Beware of promises like "I will never move you to a nursing home." Caring for dementia in advanced stages is often hard at home. People with dementia often have better quality of life if they are in a living facility.