

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: "I'm so sorry. Don't you remember, they're dead."
Say: "Hmm. Tell me about them." Share joy in sharing memory about them.
Ask questions about them. Soon attention often drifts to something else.

Example: If paranoia occurs, listen, say that sounds scary, and nod.
Then slowly guide their attention to a different, calming topic.
Instead of offering reasons why that thing they fear can't be, say:
"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:
"We'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 can be calming. Don't worry that they'll reinforce delusions. More likely, they'll help someone feel calm. Correcting these delusions will not "fix" them.

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

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. Sometimes people understand more than you think. Even if the meaning of your words is lost when you address someone directly, you are connecting with them 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 and that can often cause significant distress.

3. If aggressive behaviors occur, stay calm. Often withdrawing yourself or moving someone to another room will help. Speak calmly. Gently reach and see if they'll let you hold their hand.

When moments of agitation occur, they're likely to pass quickly if they're met with calm. Stern responses to aggression can lead to escalation and then worsening agitation.

Avoid startling someone, or surprising someone who is living with dementia. Be gentle. Sometimes someone's aggressive response to be startled is simply a defensive reflex, which gets triggered if someone is surprised and confused about what's 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 tips: Elastic waist pants. Avoid buttons and zippers. Lay an outfit out each day.

Keep a notebook handy so they can write things down.

Give them a choice between option A or option B. This can be less stressful than if you ask an open-ended question such as "What would you like?"

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 long-term they are happier) living in a facility rather than at home without stimulation. Beware of making promises like "I will never move you to a nursing home." Caring for dementia in advanced stages is hard at home. People with dementia can have better quality of life if they are in a living facility.