

Taking Care with Dementia

Five How-to Tips for Visiting a Person with Dementia

About five million Americans have Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia. The disease affects thought, language and memory. You may have a family member with dementia, or you may know someone in your congregation or community. You may be the caregiver, or you may want to help someone who is a caregiver. Understanding the nature of the disease will help you look after a loved one, a caregiver, or yourself.

1 Learn to "speak dementia."

Language shifts with the disease, and a person with dementia may generate conversational language even in the severe stage but have more trouble understanding. Avoid using the verbal shorthand friends and coworkers readily understand. You might say, "I know you like the social stuff," and the person with dementia does not understand what the "social stuff" is. Consider what language sounds like from the perspective of someone who is losing ability.

2 Sift questions carefully.

"Are you ready for the holiday?" The person with dementia may not even know what time of year it is. "What did you have for lunch?" Short-term memory loss will make this question impossible. "Remember? I said I was coming back." No, the person does not remember. Many people with dementia will feel they "should" be able to answer, and the inability to do so causes emotional distress. Craft conversation around the current activity. "Would you like to go for a walk?" "Shall we have a cup of coffee?"

3 Provide orientation hooks.

A visit with someone with dementia will go more smoothly if you subtly help the person orient to the moment. "It's a sunny day for the middle of January." "I'm Jane from church, and I enjoy coming to see you on Fridays." "It's almost time for lunch. Are you hungry?"

4 Be invitational.

As the disease progresses, even the simplest decisions can be overwhelming. Rather than asking, "What do you feel like having for lunch?" say, "I'll make us some tuna sandwiches." Rather than, "What would you like to do this afternoon?" say, "I brought this photo album to look at together."

5 Be patient.

Mental processing for many people slows as part of aging, and dementia in any form slows cognitive responses. As you make conversation, avoid filling every bit of silence. The person with dementia may be trying to form a response, a process which is disrupted by more language coming too fast. Even finding shoes and getting ready to leave the room can take longer, though the person is capable of the task without the stress of being rushed. If your visit wakes someone from a nap, allow time for the person to rouse. Offer a glass of water rather than a rush of language.

Susan Martins Miller learned these lessons firsthand in the process of losing her father to Alzheimer's disease and now helping to care for her mother in the late stage of disease.

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