



Family Caregivers of British Columbia

Tips for Visiting People with Dementia

Dementia is a disease. People have this disease. One of the symptoms of this disease is that the people who have it can no longer learn new information, remember things after a few minutes or in some cases remember past information. Every waking moment is a “first” time experience. It is the first time they have met you, every time you come to see them. If their surroundings are not a place where they have lived for a long time, every time they wake up, they are seeing the place for the first time. Remember how you felt when you first woke up in a strange bed or hotel room. Every action, place and person they meet each day is new to them.

- Greet them with a smile.
- Treat them as the friend you feel they are or person that you know and tell them your name and why you are there.
- Wear bright, appropriate clothes so the person can see you.
- The person with dementia sometimes has trouble understanding words and as such they tend to depend upon what they see – use gestures when speaking.

People with dementia depend on their emotions for survival. They will look to you for cues on how they should behave or respond. People with dementia will reflect back to you whatever emotions you are feeling. The people with dementia are a mirror or reflection of the emotions you are experiencing.

- Smile.
- Be calm and relaxed.
- Speak clearly, in small sentences and give them time to respond.

Due to changes in the brain, the person with dementia can only relate to what is in front of them now. For many it is hard to pull forward memories, identify people and things and as such is unable to understand or plan for the future.

- Be the entertainer or host. Come with things to discuss, look at or show. Stimulate their senses to help them make connections to things, like smelling a flower or holding a stone, chewing on some cookies, etc.
- If possible go for a walk and talk about the things you can see or hear. Whatever they do, is the best they can do at that time.
- Use gestures when speaking and be alert to your tone of voice and facial expressions.
- Watch for cues from the person with dementia to see if they are upset or whether you should stay to visit. Things to look for are tight fists, walking away from you, ignoring you, telling you to go away or pushing past you. It is hard to not take this personally but they are trying to tell you that they are tired and need to rest.

If you have trouble leaving because the person with dementia won't let you go, give the person something to distract them while you leave. Sometimes it is best not to tell them you are going home, because they will want to go with you.

Because of memory loss the person with dementia feels like a visitor in the facility and if you are going to that wonderful place called home, they would like to go there too. Tell them you are going to see someone else and that you will come back to see them at another time. Reassure them that you will come back again.

Sometimes, things happen before your visit and the person with dementia is upset. They are not upset with you but may say harsh things. It is best to leave them for a time and then visit them later. Even ten minutes can make a difference or come another day.

The person with dementia is only able to "live in the moment". That is they can only talk about things that they see, hear or feel, right now.

- Take them outside for walks.
- Watch for tiredness, like repeating conversations, irritability or walking away from you or asking you to leave. A short visit is better than a long visit because everything they do is hard work for them.
- Silence can be shared. Just sitting and watching is good, as well as reading to them, or even praying with them.
- Distraction is drawing their attention to something different. If they become upset, draw their attention to something else – you can not take things from them without giving them something to replace it.

A successful visit:

Success is sharing an experience with the person with dementia. Just having them know they are not alone. Success is enjoying the "moments of reality" they experience and the comments that they make so appropriately. Success is seeing them smile and knowing that your visit is leaving them with a good feeling.

Irene Barnes, Elderly Outreach Service

When you come to visit...Tips on making your visits more meaningful

Make the visits with your loved one more meaningful and relaxing.

Communicating with an individual with dementia can be very difficult. It can leave family members, visitors and residents feeling frustrated and dissatisfied, if the visit does not go well. Visiting your loved one is extremely important, however – a successful visit will make a very positive difference in the resident's day. A quality visit provides comfort, support and reassurance to the resident and makes the resident feel loved, cared for and valued. A quality visit also provides comfort and reassurance to you; by confirming that you can still make a positive difference in your family member's life and by reaffirming the love the two of you share.

This article will give you tips on how to make each visit meaningful and enjoyable for you and your family member.

Visiting a person with a dementia disease such as Alzheimer

Often in the early stages of dementia, people have trouble finding the words to express their thoughts, or may be unable to remember the meaning of simple words or phrases. The later stages may be much more difficult. Language skills can be quite impaired and the resulting statements are garbles. Sometimes it is difficult to understand what the resident is trying to say. When people cannot comprehend what is being said or cannot find the words to express their thoughts, it can be painful, frustrating and embarrassing. Your approach will set the tone.

Think about how you are presenting yourself. Are you tense? Frowning? Try smiling! People with dementia are often aware of non-verbal signals such as facial expressions, body tension and mood. Try a calm, gentle, matter-of-fact approach. Your warm smile and relaxed manner may be contagious! People with dementia are “like a mirror” and will often reflect back whatever emotions the visitor is feeling and expressing.

Go at your family member’s pace. People with dementia often need more time than we do to respond. Use slow, gentle motions. Make sure you have your family member’s attention. Sit down at eye level with the resident. Make eye contact. Smile. Tell the resident who you are and why you are there. Use gentle touch. Use loving words.

A successful visit will add value to both you and your family member’s day.

Tips for enhancing your visit

- Visit when you want to visit, not when you think you should visit.
- Find out the best time to visit with your loved one. Generally, people with dementia tend to be more alert during the late mornings and early afternoons. Talk with staff members and try to find out what is the best time to achieve a quality visit with your family member.
- Watch for fatigue. Signs of tiredness could include repeating conversations, irritability, walking away from you or asking you to leave. A short visit is usually better than a long one.
- Enjoy the silence. Silence can be a sharing and touching experience. Merely sitting and watching is good. Ask the resident if you may read to them pray together or sit together.
- Live “in the moment.” People with dementia can only talk about things that they see, hear and feel at the moment. This is their reality. Go along with it. Remember your family member is doing the best that they can. They may have moments of “reality.” Share these moments with them and see them as gifts.
- Try “tidying the house.” Ask your family member if they could help you tidy up a bit. Meaningful and familiar activities, such as folding clothes, re-arranging books and magazines, wiping tables, etc., make people feel useful, and this is still important to your family member.
- Be flexible. If your family member begins to wander, walk with them. If they seem to be more agitated, come back at another time.
- Use distraction. Distraction is a very helpful technique to draw your family member’s attention away from one thing to something different. If your family member gets upset, bring attention to something else.

- Give one instruction at a time and use physical cues. Rather than saying “Come and sit at the table, it’s time for tea,” try saying, “It’s time for tea!” (with enthusiasm), pat the chair (a physical cue) and sit down beside your family member.
- Your family member is unable to “entertain.” Come prepared to do something with them. Bring a book, a photo album, favorite music, map, etc., to reminisce. The ideas are endless. Massage your family member’s hands and feet with a soothing lotion. Give a manicure. Bring a picnic, pizza or donuts. Enjoy a stroll in the garden.
- Most of all have fun!

Other tips to keep in mind

- Low stimulation and low noise will help, if your family member is upset. Feel free to move your visit to a quieter use of the unit. HUSH...NO RUSH should be your motto!
- Don’t hesitate to ask staff for assistance.
- If you see another resident who may need assistance or redirection, please tell a staff member, instead of trying to intervene yourself.
- We consider you to be a valuable member of our team, so pass on your ideas to make your loved one’s life better and to create a better environment for all.

Just for Families; Toronto Homes for the Aged