

## Maintaining skills

**A person with dementia is a unique individual. As a carer, you will want to do everything you can to preserve their dignity and confidence. Each person experiences dementia in their own way but, using encouragement, a reassuring routine and common-sense measures, you can help them to continue to make the best use of their skills and abilities as their condition changes.**

Try to encourage the person with dementia to do whatever they can for themselves and only offer as much help as is necessary. If they are struggling with a task, avoid the temptation to take over completely, even though it may seem easier and quicker. If you take over, the person is likely to lose confidence and cope less well.

- If you do need to offer assistance, try to do things with the person rather than for them. The person will then be more likely to feel involved.
- Always try to focus on what the person can do rather than what they cannot do.
- Remember that they will have a short attention span and will be finding it hard to remember because of the dementia.
- Try to be patient and allow plenty of time. If you feel yourself becoming irritated, take time out. Make sure that the person is safe; then go into another room for a few minutes to give yourself some space.
- Give plenty of praise and encouragement.

### Ways of helping

The person may find certain tasks increasingly difficult as the dementia progresses, while others may remain much longer. Adjust any help you offer accordingly so that they can continue to make the best use of the skills they still possess. Ways of helping that may be appropriate at different times include:

- The person may be able to complete a task when it is broken down into sections, even if they can't complete it. An example of this is getting dressed. Putting the clothes out in the order they are put on may make it possible for the person to continue to dress themselves. Achieving only one or two steps of a task may give them a sense of achievement.

- Give tactful verbal reminders or simple instructions. Try to imagine that you are the person receiving the help and speak in a way that you would find helpful.
- Doing things together, such as folding clothes or drying dishes, can be helpful.
- It is very important that the person with dementia does not feel that they are being supervised or criticised in any way. The tone of voice can imply criticism as well as the actual words.
- Pointing, demonstrating or guiding an action may sometimes be more helpful than verbal explanations when the dementia is more advanced. For example, the person may be able to brush their own hair if you start by gently guiding their hand.

### Ask advice

A person with dementia may find it hard to cope with certain tasks either because of the dementia or because of other disabilities. An occupational therapist (OT) can advise on aids and adaptations and other ways to help the person retain their independence for as long as possible. You can contact an OT through social services (look in the phone book under your local council) or through your GP.

Any changes involving equipment or different approaches to practical tasks are more likely to be successful if they are introduced at an early stage when the person with dementia finds it possible to absorb new information.

### Feeling safe

- Feeling safe is such a basic human need that one might say our survival depends upon it. A person with dementia is likely to experience the world as an unsafe place for much of the time. We can

only imagine how frightening it must be to experience the world in this way. This is why a person with dementia may try to keep as close as possible to people they recognise.

- The less anxious and stressed the person with dementia feels, the more likely they are to be able to use their skills to the best advantage. A relaxed, uncritical atmosphere is therefore very important.
- Familiar surroundings and a regular routine are reassuring for people with dementia.
- Too many conflicting sounds or too many people can add to confusion. If possible, turn off the radio or the television or, if the person needs to concentrate on something in particular, take them to a quiet place.
- A person with dementia is quite likely to be upset or embarrassed by their declining abilities or clumsiness. They will need plenty of reassurance.
- Although you need to be tactful and encouraging, sometimes the best thing when things go wrong is to have a good laugh together.

## Occupation

We all need to feel useful and needed. This does not change when someone develops dementia. Carrying out appropriate activities around the home or in the garden, if you have one, is a way of enabling a person with dementia feel useful and to practise everyday skills.

Suggestions for chores in the home include dusting, polishing, folding clothes, laying and clearing tables, drying dishes and sorting cutlery. Work in the garden might include digging, watering, raking or sweeping leaves.

You will know what the person's past interests were. Look and see whether you can help them to maintain skills related to past interests. If the person used to enjoy carpentry, they may get satisfaction from sanding a piece of wood, for example. If they enjoyed cooking they may be able to advise you on a recipe or help with a particular dish.

- It is more important that the person feels useful than that they complete the task perfectly.
- If you do have to redo something, be very tactful and make sure that they are not aware of this.

- Remember to thank the person for their help.

## Memory aids

Memory aids and frequent reminders given at the appropriate stage may enable the person to practise their skills for longer. Commonsense measures such as labels on cupboards and drawers, a large calendar, a notice board for messages, notes stuck by the front door, for example, can all help in the early stages of dementia when the person is able to understand the message and to act upon it.

## Social skills

- Meeting people and getting out and about will enable people with dementia to maintain their social skills for longer. It can also help to counteract the apathy and withdrawal so common in dementia. However, remember that the person will need plenty of individual attention at social gatherings and on outings.
- Explain the situation to friends and neighbours so they will understand changes in behaviour.
- Encourage the person to attend a day centre if a suitable place is offered. You will both benefit from a break, even for a few hours, and a good day centre will help maintain social and other skills.
- Accompany the person with dementia to places where other people go. This might be a visit to the shops, to a garden centre, to a gallery or to a park, depending on their interests.
- If the person enjoys going out for a drink or a meal, continue this for as long as possible. A word with the manager of a friendly pub, café or restaurant can often smooth the way if there are likely to be minor embarrassments.
- Encourage the person to take a pride in their appearance so that they feel more confident. Helping the person to get dressed up before they go out or before visitors come can make it more of an occasion.