

Memory loss in dementia

If you are caring for a person with dementia you will want to find ways to help them cope with memory problems so that they can retain their confidence and independence for as long as possible. Here are some suggestions.

Loss of memory is often one of the earliest signs of dementia. In older people it may be mistaken for the normal forgetfulness people experience as they grow older or when they are very stressed. However, it will become apparent later that the person's memory problems are severe and persistent, and are accompanied by changes in thinking and feeling which make it more difficult for them to cope with everyday life.

Everyone is different

Memory has many different aspects and people with dementia will be affected in different ways. You may find, for example, that the person retains memory for certain skills until quite a late stage, or that they surprise you with particular facts or experiences that they can still recall, though they are very forgetful in other areas.

Try to be flexible and patient and encourage the person to remember what they can without putting pressure on them in any way.

Memory for the past

Most people with dementia remember the distant past more clearly than recent events. They may have difficulty in recalling what happened a few moments ago but can recall their life when they were much younger in great detail. However, even these long-term memories will eventually decline.

- The person may be anxious about their memory loss, particularly in the early stages of dementia. Opportunities to share memories of the past can help to restore their sense of coherence.
- Talking about the past can often be enjoyable and help a person retain their sense of who they are.
- Use photographs, souvenirs and other appropriate items to help jog the person's memories of the past.
- If certain memories from the past seem very upsetting, try to give the person the opportunity

to express their feelings and show them that you understand.

New information

People with memory problems find it very hard to take in new information and remember it.

- Keep information simple and repeat it frequently.
- Break down new activities into small stages.

Avoiding extra stress

If the person is tired, unwell, anxious or depressed, they will find it even more difficult to remember. Memory problems will also become more apparent if they try to do more than one thing at a time or if they are distracted by noise or bustle.

- If you think that the person may be ill or depressed consult the GP.
- Make sure the person has plenty of support. Try to reduce stress as much as possible.
- Help them concentrate on one thing at a time.
- Try to make sure that there are no distractions.
- Provide verbal cues rather than ask questions. For example: 'Here is David, your nephew, come to see you', rather than 'Do you remember who this is?'

Maintaining independence

- The person should be helped to remain independent for as long as possible. However, you will need to take certain precautions if the person is at risk because of their forgetfulness.
- Help the person to continue to do things for themselves, using frequent reminders and doing things 'with' them instead 'for' them.

Regular routine

Although variety and stimulation are important, too many changes will be confusing.

- A regular routine will help the person feel more secure and make it easier for them to remember what usually happens during the day.
- Leave things in the same place so that the person can find them easily.

Memory aids

In the early stages, memory aids such as lists, diaries and clear, written instructions can be helpful in jogging memory if the person is willing and able to make use of them. However, you need to be aware that, as the dementia progresses, they may not be able to understand what the aids are for.

Loss of sense of time

You may find that the person begins to lose their sense of time quite early on in dementia. The person may find it hard to judge how much time has passed because they can't remember what they have done or what they are going to do that day.

Try to keep to a regular routine. Tactful reminders of the day and time and what you are going to do next may help.

Fact and fiction

As dementia progresses, facts may become confused with imagination. It is usually best not to argue with the person. Try to put yourself in their situation and understand what they might be trying to say or what they are feeling and relate to that.

If you do have to contradict the person or correct them do so in a way that saves face and shows that you are not being critical.

Living in the past

As the person's short-term memory gradually deteriorates they may find memories, feelings and routines associated with the past more real than those in the present.

Sometimes they may even seem to be living in the past and insist, for example, that they have to wait for their mother to take them to school. Try not to contradict. Use this as an opportunity to relate to what they may be remembering or feeling. You

might encourage them to talk about the past or comfort them if they seem sad.

Lack of recognition

People with dementia may eventually lose the ability to recognise people, places or things because their brain can no longer remember or put information together. They may even fail to recognise their own reflection in a mirror and think it someone else, or they may worry that a relative or close friend is an intruder in their home.

Tactful explanations and reminders can often help to reassure the person and enable them to continue to make some sense of their environment and the people around them.

It is very distressing if the person no longer recognises you or others close to them. Talk to someone you trust about how you feel.