

Interacting with Persons with Dementia: Practical Tips

Everyone has the basic human need to feel love and to live in relationship. This essential need continues to be true for individuals living with dementia who often live in the moment and may not recognize those around them. Memories of the experience may not last, but the love and connection will have a positive impact on the individual's wellbeing. As a church body we have the opportunity to be with people in their moments, creating a place of joy, peace, comfort, and security.

DO

- Approach gently, noticing where the person's eye level is, to ensure you do not startle the person. Smile and make eye contact. Give a genuine smile and focus on the person. This conveys you're glad to be together.
- Greet the person by name and reintroduce yourself: "Hi _____, It's _____. I'm your _____. I love seeing the sun shining outside today."
- Meet people with dementia where they are, accepting their reality. Avoid trying to correct them and instead enter the space where they are for that moment: "I see you enjoy the buttons on my shirt. I like them holding my shirt closed. We can unbutton my jacket if you'd like and look at the buttons in it more closely."
- Validate feelings. Affectionally affirm feelings and reassure instead of trying to convince the person he or she is wrong or doesn't need to be feeling that way. "It is unsettling to be startled. Let's do something calming now, together. We can sing together if you'd like."
- Minimize questions which can be hard for people. Instead wonder with them. Instead of "Do you like almond bars?" Try, "I wonder if these almond bars taste like what my mom used to make. I'm going to try one." Instead of "what are you going to do this afternoon?" Try, "The weather outside is sunny and warm again today; it seems like a good day for a walk."

- Offer to help if you see someone who is standing alone or looking like they don't know what to do next. "It looks like the sink is open to wash your hands if you are ready." "I'm grabbing coffee too. We can walk together if you'd like."
- Speak to the person like you would a friend, avoid using childlike or condescending language and tone. Instead of "Aw, you like red, huh?" Try, "Red is a lovely color. I have a red _____" Instead of "Let me help you, dear" Try "I could help you with _____ if you'd like me to."
- Invite people into conversation. They may listen or chime in. If they contribute something off topic, give a simple, short, and friendly reply and then continue with the conversation. "Thanks for sharing with us. I'm curious what others have to say about _____."
- Offer choices instead of open-ended questions. It may be helpful to use your hands or objects to point to, to pick which option they choose. "Would you like to sing a song [left hand out] or read a Scripture [right hand out]?"
- If you are asking the person to do something, demonstrate what to do.
- Use gentle humor and laugh together.
- Be aware of visual cues. The individual may not verbally articulate feelings of happiness, anxiety, or frustration but facial expressions and/or body positioning can show these clearly. The individual may not initiate a greeting, but you can still look them in the eye, smile, and greet them by name with a gentle touch on the hand or arm.

DON'T

- Don't ask if they remember you or recent activities.
- Don't ignore the person. If you have a question, ask the person first before turning to a family member or caregiver.
- Don't use slang or figures of speech that could be confusing. Instead of "I was happier than a pig in mud after I googled that" Try, "I was happy to learn about it."
- Don't rely only on verbal communication, or assume you need to talk louder. Watch body language and tension, and facial expressions. Dementia causes differences in *processing* language and sounds, not necessarily ability to *hear* sound

Spiritual Practices

People of faith who have dementia often experience an improved sense of well-being when engaging in faith practices. Here are some of the practices that you can do together:

- Pray
- Read familiar scripture passages
- Sing favorite hymns or songs of praise
- Attend worship services
- Remember God's promises
- Express gratitude
- Experience God in nature

Consider also using ideas from Barbara Newman's [Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship](#) with persons experiencing dementia.

References and Resources

- Holland Home Dementia Care Handbook (available as a PDF at hollandhome.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Dementia_Care_Handbook_Web-2018Update.pdf)
- Resources from Teepa Snow, Positive Approach to Care at teepasnow.com/
- Books by John Swinton: *Becoming Friends of Time*, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, available [on Amazon](#)
- Articles on how music supports engagement:
 - CNN article on Music Mends Minds work during COVID pandemic: cnn.com/2020/10/15/health/coronavirus-seniors-dementia-music-cnnheroes/index.html
 - Study: Memories of music cannot be lost to Alzheimer's and dementia: tinyurl.com/musicNotlost
- Reformed Worship article referencing the work of Dr. Warren Kinghorn and others, regarding worship practices and persons with dementia: reformedworship.org/article/december-2017/worship-and-mental-health
- Sample order of worship, from the Evening Star Worship Guide: withministries.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Evening-Star-example-of-order-of-worship.pdf
- 10 ways to minister (from the UMC) with families affected by dementia: umcom.org/learn/10-ways-churches-can-minister-to-those-with-dementia-and-their-families