

# 10

tips for  
supporting  
someone  
living with  
dementia



**HammondCare**

An independent Christian charity

With patience and understanding you can make a great difference in the quality of life of anyone living with dementia. Spending time with a friend or family member with dementia can be a wonderful time, but it's also a challenge. We hope these tips will make your time together more enjoyable and rewarding.



## 1 Start by listening

**The starting point for any communication is listening.**

When you really listen carefully to what a person has to say, even if it may not make a great deal of sense (and listening can be difficult), it is a way of saying "you are important to me and I care about you". It can give an older person's self-esteem a real boost.

It's not unusual for a person living with dementia to repeat themselves in conversation. So sometimes it may require patience to allow them to tell you things that are important to them, that they have already told you (perhaps even a number of times before!). Most of us like to talk about ourselves, and relating one's problems makes them easier to bear.

## 2 The 5 S's

**Communicating with someone with dementia can be challenging. There are *Five S's* to remember that may make your conversation with an older person easier:**

### Slow

**Slow down** your rate of speech and wait for the person to respond (this can sometimes take a while).

### Simple

Keep what you say **simple** - one idea at a time, using short sentences.

### Specific

Talk about **specific** people, objects or events they may remember. Use names (John, Mary) instead of pronouns (he, she).

### Show

Use gestures, point to items, use visual examples such as photographs, or **show** choices...if you are saying "would you like to wear the blue cardigan?", show the cardigan.

### Smile

Facial expressions can be understood long after verbal language is lost. Send a message with a **smile!**



## 3 Keep them informed



**Talk to the person with dementia about what's happening in the family, the wider community, or in the old neighbourhood.**

With a family member, you can share problems as well as pleasant and exciting family events. Older people and people with dementia are not too fragile to deal with sadness and death. Protecting them may make them feel left out and they have a right to know.

Try not to dwell too much on your problems as they may fret and feel powerless to assist. You may have noticed that many older people talk more about the distant past than about recent events. This is because when memory is failing it is often easier to remember distant events.

Like everyone else, older people want to talk about times when they played important roles and about significant happenings in their lives. Experts agree that it is good to encourage older people to talk about their past. When words make no sense, focus on the emotion the speaker is trying to convey - this will help your older friend or relative to feel understood, even though they can't find the appropriate words. Try a comment like "you were very annoyed", or "gosh, you look really pleased".

When someone appears not to be making any sense you can try echoing back a key word using a questioning tone of voice. Sometimes this will give the person the understanding that you are really listening to them. Don't worry if there are factual errors or the details are incorrect.



## 4 Reassuring touch

**Touch is not always appropriate. But if you are close to the person, or if they are a family member, it may be acceptable.**

When the circumstances are appropriate, touch is a very powerful way of connecting with your friend or family member. Gently but firmly holding hands can establish a connection and can convey support. Gentle massage can be relaxing and reassuring. Even stroking their face can be tender and loving.

Above all, whatever you do, you must treat the person living with dementia with respect and consideration in all circumstances.



## 5 We all have bad days

**If the person with dementia doesn't want you to talk, turns away from you, or says or even gestures "no!", don't force the issue.**

Your friend or relative may possibly be reacting to an event or memory that has little to do with the present situation. It is ok to say "I'll leave now" and leave.

Sometimes going back after a break of even as little as a few minutes and trying a new approach can make all the difference.

There is much we still don't know about dementia, and it's not always possible to explain a person's actions or behaviour. But kindness and patience will always be the most important tools to give ongoing support and comfort to any person living with dementia.





## 6 Encourage reminiscing

**Talk about your friend or relative's life and achievements. You may be able to look through photos and albums, scrapbooks, or familiar objects together.**

Even if the person complains about their current situation, this can be an opportunity to recall how things used to be. If, for example, your friend or relative complains about the food, sympathise with them and talk with them about their favourite foods, cooking, or restaurants. Perhaps they will remember something special from their past that is a strong memory for them in spite of their more recent memory loss...for example a favourite fruitcake they used to cook. Here's a great chance to bring in a piece of fruitcake to revive memories and encourage reminiscing!

Making a "Personal Life History" booklet is a great idea. This is a book or photo album with pictures and words detailing their life story. Many people like to look at familiar pictures. And it can help the professional caregivers of the person to get to know and appreciate them more through understanding their life story.



## 7 Don't rush to give advice

**Most of us don't really welcome unrequested advice. People living with dementia are no different.**

It probably won't help to rush to give advice in your conversations with a friend or family member. Instead, ask their advice or opinions about something in your life that may interest them, and take the time to enjoy listening to their answer.

Talk about activities or hobbies that your relative or friend was proud of - pruning the roses, fixing the car, or whatever is important to them and comes to their memory - and ask simple questions they may be able to answer.



## 8 Empathise with feelings

**Don't try to deny people's feelings.**

If your friend or relative is upset about an event, even if it did not really occur (for example, if she thinks the lady next door stole her dress, and you know it is in the laundry), it's not important to convince her that the dress is actually in the laundry.

She needs your sympathy that sometimes things get lost and that it's hard living in such close quarters. Listen to complaints. Don't feel your relative or friend is angry with you. Often, a sympathetic ear is all that is needed. If they feel you understand you can often then divert the conversation.



## 9 Things to do together\*

Bring newspapers or magazine articles

Play games they enjoy

Assist with correspondence

Bring others to visit

Bring pets

Bring grandchildren...and great-grandchildren!

Take your friend or relative for an outing

Share your skills and talents

\* It might be important to check with professional carers or the person first



## 10 Talk to staff

If professional carers are involved, take some time to get to know them and keep in touch with them.

Many people with dementia are involved in professional care, whether community or residential care. Staff will be interested in your relative or friend and will enjoy learning more about them. This helps professional carers or nursing home staff to understand and provide better care.

Share with the carers stories and some background to the person you are visiting. Tell them about your friend or relative's favourite things or interests and things they derive pleasure from.

And if there is any behaviour or activity that is worrying you, some professional help will be important.

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The Four S's were from Jillian Ball's section on Communication in Bowden, H. & Squires, B. Dealing With Dementia. A Self Study Course for Carers. Continuing Education, University of New South Wales, 1987, with further writing by Meredith Gresham



Level 2, 447 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000

P +61 2 8280 8444 1300 426 666

[www.hammond.com.au](http://www.hammond.com.au)

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