

Activities of Daily Living & Other Problems

Maintaining skills

As a carer you will want to ensure that the person with dementia makes the best use of their skills and abilities at each stage of the illness in order to preserve their dignity and confidence. Of course each person experiences dementia in their own way but you can often help through encouragement and commonsense measures as well as with a reassuring routine.



You will want to encourage the person with dementia to do whatever they can for themselves and only offer as much help as is necessary. Avoid the temptation to take over completely if they are struggling with a task even though it may be easier and quicker for everyone. If you do, they are likely to lose whatever remains of their confidence and to cope less well as a result.

- If you do need to offer assistance, try to do things with the person rather than for them, so that they remain involved.
- Try to focus on what the person can rather than on what they can't do.
- Remember the person may be forgetful and have a short attention span due to the dementia.
- Try to be patient and allow plenty of time for the completion of tasks. If you feel yourself becoming irritated, go into another room for a few minutes and take some deep breaths.
- Give plenty of praise and encouragement.

Ways of helping

As dementia progresses, the person may find certain tasks increasingly difficult, while they may be able to cope with others for some time. 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. Such an example is

laying things out in the order that the person will need such as clothes when getting dressed. If they are having difficulty in completing a whole task, achieving only one or two steps of a task on their own may still give them a sense of achievement.

- Verbal reminders or simple instructions.
- Doing things together such as folding clothes or drying dishes.
- It is important that the person with dementia does not feel 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 at later stages. For example, the person may be able to brush their own hair if the carer starts by gently guiding their hand.

Ask advice

People with dementia may find it hard to cope with certain tasks 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 with dementia retain their independence for as long as possible. You can contact an OT through the public health nurse, the local health centre, your GP or your local hospital.

Any changes involving equipment or different approaches are more likely to be successful if they are introduced at an early stage when the person with dementia is more capable of absorbing new information.

Feeling safe

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 important.

- Familiar surroundings and a regular routine are reassuring for people with dementia.
- Too many conflicting sounds or too many people can be confusing. Turn off the radio or TV or take the person to a quiet place if they need to concentrate on a task.
- The person may be upset or embarrassed by their declining abilities or clumsiness and will need plenty of reassurance.
- Although you need to be tactful and encouraging, sometimes you just have to laugh together when things go wrong.

Feeling useful

We all need to feel useful and needed. Helping with simple tasks around the home or in the garden, if you have one, is a good way of enabling people with dementia to practise everyday skills and feel useful at the same time.

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.

Look and see whether you can also help them maintain skills related to past interests. If the person was good at carpentry they may get satisfaction from sawing a piece of wood, for example, or if they enjoyed cooking they may be able to advise you on a recipe or help with a particular dish.

Try not to worry if such tasks are not done very well. What matters is that the person with dementia is active and involved and still using their abilities.

- It is more important that the person feels they are helping than that everything is done perfectly.

- Be very tactful if you do have to redo a chore. Make sure that the person is not aware of this fact.
- Remember to thank them for helping.

Memory aids

Memory aids and frequent reminders may enable people to practise their skills for longer. Many memory aids are simply commonsense measures such as labels on drawers and cupboards, a large calendar, a noticeboard for messages. However, these may only be effective during the early stages of dementia when the person is both able to understand and act on the information.

Social skills

Meeting people and getting out and about can enable people to maintain their social skills and help counteract the apathy and withdrawal that are so common in dementia. But they will usually need on-to-one attention on outings or at social gatherings.

- Explain the situation to friends and neighbours so that they will understand any little oddities and encourage them to drop in for a chat.
- Encourage the person to attend an appropriate day centre if a place is offered. A good day centre can help them maintain social and other skills.
- Accompany the person with dementia to places where other people go. Depending on what they enjoy this might be a visit to the shops, for example, or visit to the local garden centre or to hear music in the park.
- If the person enjoys going out for a drink or a meal then try to 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 pride in their appearance so they feel more confident. Helping the person to dress up before they go out or before visitors arrive can make it more of an occasion.