

Keeping in touch with a person with a dementia

Keeping in touch

We all recognise the importance and the pleasure of keeping in touch with family and friends.

This can be even difficult when a person has a dementia.

This information sheet suggests what works and why. It can be shared with family and friends who may be wondering how best to keep in touch.

Written communication: Whatever happened to letters? The only ones we seem to get these days are from the bank or junk mail.

Consider:

- Ask family and friends to send postcards/note cards with a short message. This will give something to look forward to and talk about. If the person you care for becomes anxious that they can't remember the sender, remind them gently and reassure them (e.g. don't worry, they remember you/ /they have been gone a while/ I forget names too).
- Write cards and short letters yourself. The person with the dementia can be encouraged to join in as much as their abilities allow, perhaps by suggesting information to go in, or by choosing, signing and posting the card.
- Encourage family and friends to share photos and short videos rather than written texts. A closed Facebook group or similar app can be invite-only. It is possible to get rid of adverts for a fee making the screen less confusing.

Comments from relatives: 'she recognises my writing immediately'.

'I was driving across the moors, saw some ponies and thought of my aunt who was a keen rider. I bought a postcard of Dartmoor ponies and posted it to her to tell her I was thinking about her'

Parcels: small parcels are joyful and need not be expensive.

Consider:

- Sending some yourself with the person with the dementia choosing items, wrapping and posting as their abilities allow.
- Encourage regular small parcels for the person with the dementia e.g. magazine subscriptions; food; activity books/jigsaws – these can be via Amazon to cut down on time.

Comments from relatives: 'I sent a nicely framed photo to my aunt of my mum and her when they were young. My cousin tells me how much she loves it she is still saying "how lovely it is to have Rosemary close, when she wakes up in the morning".'

Phone communication: (these guidelines can also work for facetime/skype).

Studies have shown that people living with dementia often retain the 'social proficiency' to be willing conversationalists: they continue to want to communicate; to understand turn taking; knowledge of what a question is; being polite; knowing when and how to end a conversation.

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What can be impaired is the person's memory for recent events. Often, an individual believes they are living in the past. As a result, there can be a mismatch between the people in the conversation. The person **without** dementia may use words, ideas, questions and has expectation of replies which are based in the world **they** understand – not necessarily in the world that the person with dementia understands.

What can help and what doesn't help?

The person **without** dementia needs to take into consideration what the person with dementia knows and does not know.

For example, if the person with dementia has an impaired short-term memory and poor memory for facts, they will not be able to remember what happened this morning or yesterday or even that they rang you. So, returning a call by saying: 'Was there something you wanted?', or 'did you have a nice lunch?' or 'did (name of person) come to see you yesterday?' may be impossible for the person to answer.

People with dementia may get over any difficulties in the conversation by:

- Returning to a 'default' topic, for example 'when are you coming to see me?'
- Replying with what they think you want to hear: 'yes' or 'no', or 'that's nice'.
- Becoming anxious: 'Sorry, I can't remember anything these days'.

Or they may say a phrase that passes for normal and fits with the conversation.

For example, 'What did you do at the weekend?', person with dementia replies, 'Oh, nothing special'.

This may be fine until they get it wrong. For example, if at the weekend they had a special visitor. A 'wrong' answer will focus on their loss of abilities. Their remaining abilities (i.e. knowing a reply was expected, it's their turn, and what passes for a normal reply) have been overshadowed.

The person with dementia may have forgotten important events in their life, which the person ringing still knows. This 'misalignment' can cause problems in the conversation.

For example: The person with dementia may continue to refer to someone who has died as if they were still alive; or ask to 'come home' if they have moved to a residential home.

Having a consistent and confident answer will help. The person will pick up on hesitancy.

If the answer goes against what the person wishes to happen or against their reality, the person may become upset. Think about this for yourself – how would you feel if someone was always questioning you, correcting you or pointing out that you were mistaken?

Top tips for the Telephone

- Plan some topics in advance to talk about that do not rely on the person's memory: tell the person about **your** day; or something you remember about your shared past, without expecting them to remember. 'I remember as a child when you used to take me to.....'
- Ask them their opinion on something: 'do you like....' 'what do you think of.....'
- Compliment them on anything they get right – this will boost their confidence in conversation.
- Agree with other family/friends a consistent answer to any 'difficult' questions.
- Make the call fairly short so the conversation doesn't run dry – there is a danger of falling back into questions that are dependent on memory. And try to end on a positive note 'how lovely to hear from you...'

Summarised from: A family living with Alzheimer's disease: The communicative challenges

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