

Living Safely with DEMENTIA

Living in a community that is safe, familiar and comfortable is important to everyone, including people with dementia. A person is still capable of living well in the community even with a diagnosis of dementia.

The following information can help communities better understand and support someone living with dementia.

Dementia is an overall term for a set of symptoms that are caused by disorders affecting the brain. Symptoms may include memory loss and difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language, severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities.

DEMENTIA MAY BE A POSSIBILITY WHEN AN INDIVIDUAL:

- Appears confused and disoriented
- Does not understand the current situation or is unable to sort out the obvious, such as their name and address, where they are, or where they are going
- Has no idea about the time of day or how much time has passed since leaving home
- Must be told repeatedly who you are and what you want
- Appears fearful, agitated, angry or is crying
- Provides inappropriate responses to simple questions, or does not respond at all
- May have a blank facial expression or one that is inappropriate to the situation
- Is dressed inappropriately, perhaps overdressed in the summer months or underdressed during cold weather

Some approaches can help communicate more effectively with a person with dementia.

COMMUNICATION TIPS

1. Identify yourself, e.g., "My name is... I'm here to help you get home."
2. Approach the person from the front.
3. Move slowly; face the person or maintain eye contact.
4. Address the person by name; speak slowly and clearly.
5. Present one idea at a time.
6. Repeat/rephrase responses to clarify what he/she is trying to tell you.
7. Ask questions requiring "yes" or "no" and allow time for a response.
8. Back up your words with actions using gestures.
9. Listen actively and acknowledge the person's emotional state.
10. Touching too roughly or quickly could cause increased stress.

One of the most common situations a community member might encounter is a lost or disoriented person. Here are three steps to help someone with dementia who seems to be lost:

1. Know the signs

- Not dressed for the weather
- Standing still, looking around for a long period of time
- Pacing
- Looking confused or disoriented
- Repeating the same question within a short period

2. Know what to say

- Speak slowly and calmly
- Loudness can convey anger; do not assume person is hearing impaired
- Use short, simple words
- Ask “yes” and “no” questions
- Ask one question at a time, allowing plenty of time for response
- If necessary, repeat the same question using the exact wording; people with dementia may only understand a part of the question at a time

3. Know what to do

- Approach from the front
- Identify yourself and explain why you’ve approached the person
- Maintain a calm environment
- Maintain good eye contact
- Avoid confrontation
- Avoid correcting or “reality checks”
- Check to see if the person is wearing a MedicAlert® Safely Home® bracelet
- Call police (911) for help returning the person home safely. Wait with the person until the police arrive

You may encounter a person with dementia in a variety of other circumstances such as:

1. Abuse

People with dementia can be vulnerable to all forms of abuse and these concerns should be taken seriously.

2. Auto Accidents

You may encounter a person driving erratically or failing to obey street signs, traffic signals or speed limits.

3. Making False Accusations Against Others

The person with dementia may reduce their trust in both themselves and their surroundings. As a result, they may become suspicious of the people around them. They may accuse people of theft, misconduct, or of other improper behaviour directed against them.

4. Unintentionally expressing inappropriate behaviour in public

The emotional reactions due to dementia can make inappropriate behaviour (such as taking off clothes in public) a possibility.

5. Shoplifting

A person with dementia may forget to pay for items in a store, or even fail to realize that it is necessary to pay for items before leaving the store.

6. Appearance of Intoxication

The confusion, disorientation and lack of physical coordination that accompany dementia can often be mistaken for signs of intoxication.

Adapted from *Finding Your Way* and the *FIRST RESPONDER HANDBOOK*

For more information, call the Alzheimer Society at 204-943-6622 or visit www.alzheimer.mb.ca



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