

Alzheimer Society Waterloo Wellington

Contact Us Today For Support

Our Mission

To alleviate the personal and social consequences of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias and to promote research.

Our Vision

To be a sustainable and responsive leader in the field of dementia offering specialized services to all persons along the dementia journey.



Help for Today. *Hope for Tomorrow...*[®]

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VISITING

The Art of Connection

Visiting family and friends living with dementia



Alzheimer Society

WATERLOO WELLINGTON

When memory changes, relationships with family and friends become increasingly important in maintaining abilities and self-worth. No matter where one resides, friendship, connection, and social interactions provide a foundation for personal well-being.

THE POWER OF A SIMPLE VISIT

Visiting sustains self-esteem and personhood for those living with dementia. Visiting also:

- Maintains emotional memories.
- Affirms the person with dementia thus helping them feel respected and validated.
- Strengthens family ties.
- Assists in acknowledging and easing anxiety.
- Creates relaxing, pleasurable experiences.
- Supports reflections on past happier days, thus giving rise to positive emotions.
- Provides comfort and confirms a loving presence in their life.

WHAT IS VISITING?

Visiting a person with dementia is about being present and about sharing a moment in time together. Visiting is not about whether he or she recognizes you, the length of time you spend together, if they can engage in a conversation as they once did or if they will remember your visit tomorrow.

The power of the moment is the key to visiting

Visiting Tips for the First Few Weeks

- Provide plenty of hugs and hand holding, or a form of touch that the person finds comforting. Don't forget to smile, provide good eye contact, and use supportive communication techniques. All of these express the support that is especially required at this time.
- Assure the person with dementia that you will return and that if they are ever ill or in crises, you will be there for them.
- Reassure the person with dementia that although the adjustment to this new home may not always be easy, in time everything will be more familiar.
- Validate their feelings—this is a significant transition. Be patient, and accept what they say and how they say it as all communication has meaning.
- Provide mini-tours of the home, enjoying together the wall art, the recreation rooms, the chapel, café area and the outdoor gardens and landscaping.
- As you come and go during the first few weeks, ensure that your family member's space includes some familiar personal belongings to enhance their sense of home and comfort. Familiar objects can offer opportunities for reminiscing and enjoyment as well. Examples include pillows, wall hangings, family photos, favourite foods, vases, blankets, music player, or magazines.

No matter the time or environment, remember that visiting a person with dementia is about being present and about sharing a moment in time together. Visiting is not about whether he or she recognizes you, the length of time you spend together, if they can engage in a conversation as they once did or if they will remember your visit tomorrow. There are opportunities for meaningful connection with every person with dementia.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR LONG-TERM CARE

Visiting in the First Weeks Following Admission

After admission to long-term care the person with dementia may experience a period of transition. They often grieve the loss of their familiar surroundings, and need time to move forward to embrace the new environment, new faces, new care providers and new daily schedules.

Visits from family and friends offer stability and a sense of the familiar. Visits also underscore the love and value which the family member needs as they adjust.

Visiting goals in the first few weeks include:

- Communication of unflinching, unconditional love and support.
- Reassurance for anxiety.
- Support for the process of helping the person with dementia adjust to, and enjoy, their new environment.
- Provision of education and advocacy with the staff on behalf of your family member. Remember you know your family member or friend the best, due to your shared history. Take time with the staff to explain the history, habits, wishes and needs of the person with dementia.
- Consider providing staff a completed copy of the “*All About Me*” booklet available at your local Alzheimer Society.

***“My wife doesn’t always know me today,
but I know her”
—Ray Wiseman***

PLANNING A VISIT

How Often Should I Visit?

- Shorter, more frequent visits are often more beneficial for the person with dementia. Where possible, try to plan for regular visit times that consider and support the person with dementia’s current routine.
- Visits will be most effective when you, the visitor, are rested, engaged and not feeling rushed.
- If you are the primary visitor, and will be absent for a period of time, let other friends and family know so they can fill the void.

Questions to Consider

- What time of day is best for the person with dementia?
- Would it be helpful to visit during mealtimes to assist?
- Do I coordinate my visit to accompany the person with dementia to a favourite recreation opportunity?
- Am I coordinating my visit with other visitors so the person with dementia receives as many different visits as possible? Keep in mind, the person with dementia will often respond better to only one or two visitors at a time, as following multiple conversations can be difficult.



COMMUNICATION—Rituals for Connection

Connecting with a person with dementia involves both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Persons with dementia often have significant difficulty finding the right words to express their thoughts. As a family member or friend, your shared history will enable you to support the person in conversation.

Tips for Successful Communication

- As the disease progresses, you may want to introduce yourself when you arrive (e.g. “Hi Mom, it’s Susan”).
- Create a positive atmosphere for your visit. Smile, touch and position yourself at eye level with the person with dementia. Utilize a calm, caring tone of voice.
- Use visual cues and gestures to enhance understanding.
- Allow time for the person with dementia to respond and express themselves.
- Keep the conversation short and simple; one thought at a time.
- Validate the person’s emotions. For example, “I understand you are feeling.....(sad, angry, frustrated, etc.). That must be so very hard for you. I want to help as much as I can”.
- Enter the reality of the person with dementia; avoid arguing or reasoning. If possible, focus more on the person’s emotions than the specific content.
- Meet anxiety and restlessness with reassuring words.
- Offer plenty of praise and affirmation (e.g. “You are a wonderful father”).
- Remember that silence is fine. Presence and moments of joy are the goal, not continual verbal communication.

***“Dementia is a shift in the way a person experiences the world around them”
- Dr. A. Power***

“My family member cries every time I start to get ready to leave.”

- Ending visits can be challenging if the person with dementia becomes anxious or angry. Try engaging them in conversation with a staff member or another resident and quietly slip away.
- Try to plan your departure to coincide with a mealtime or an activity that does not require your participation.
- Often staff report that soon after a family member’s departure, the person is able to calm down and engage in another activity. It is often more distressing in the end for you, and this is an opportunity for you to seek support from others who understand.
- Sometimes a visit has been particularly frustrating or draining. It takes a lot of energy and understanding to keep visiting week after week. Talking to someone can sometimes help.
- Staff would like to know if you are having difficulty visiting, as they often have suggestions that can make a difference.

The 3 R’s: A Tool for Responding in Difficult Situations

- **Recognize:** Acknowledge the emotion the person is communicating
 - E.g.: “You seem upset by this”, or “that must be distressing”.
- **Reassure:** Provide assurance to the person that they have been heard, that you are there, and that you will help them.
 - E.g.: “I want to hear what happened”, or “I will help you”
- **Redirect:** Provide a gentle, relevant distraction to the person to help them focus on a different area.
 - E.g.: “Let’s get a coffee/snack while we talk about this”, or “How about some fresh air while we work this out”.

DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

“My family member keeps asking to go home. It makes me feel so guilty that I dread visiting.”

- Perhaps the best way to respond is to be sympathetic to the wish (e.g. “I know how much you would like to be home, and I wish it were possible”).
- Try not to respond defensively, or ignore the feeling being expressed.
- Many people who say they want to ‘go home’ really want to return to another time in their lives. Reminiscing about ‘home’ is appropriate in this situation.

“Sometimes when I visit, he or she becomes very angry with me.”

- Many times throughout the day a person with dementia may have to face situations that affect them, for which they have no control over.
- The anger is often directed against the very people they love, because these are the people that it seems safe to be angry with.
- React quietly and calmly. If your friend or family member continues to be upset, you may want to leave the room for a while and re-energize your batteries. Try returning in a few minutes, when you are sure that you are feeling calmer.



VISITING TOOLS

Visiting Kit

- A visiting kit is a tool for bringing the unexpected and the joyful into the visiting experience. A visiting kit can also support communication by offering visual, tactile, and auditory cues. Be creative—fill the kit with visiting props that you think the person with dementia will connect with.
- Kits may include: magazines, copies of photos, newspapers, candy, a healthy snack, silly putty, hand lotion, a small stuffed animal, a favourite CD, etc.
- As the visit progresses the items can be revealed and serve as a topic for conversation, a pleasurable snack or activity.

Memory Books

- Memory books are designed to assist with reminiscing and provide comfort and pleasure through familiar photos and affirmative phrases.
- Try to keep it to one photo per page, and label who or what is in that photo.
- Memory books may be completed with, or on behalf of, the person with dementia.
- Consider using plastic sheet protectors and a binder. Memory book templates may be purchased.

Books and Magazines

- Books and magazines with pictures of interest to the person with dementia can provide pleasurable moments during your visit.
- Have books, photos and puzzles available for other visitors to utilize as they visit.

Visiting Journal

- Many people with dementia need help to remember the visits that have occurred. Encourage visitors to record their visit in a visiting book, including: date of visit, name of the visitor and what they did together during their time.
- Let other family members and friends know about the importance of always writing in the visiting journal.
- Consider having a reminder note on both the book and the door.
- New visitors can remind the person of their past guests. This may help to reinforce their ongoing connection with family and friends, and to stimulate memory.
- In a situation where the visiting book may get lost or misplaced, a “Visitor Calendar” fixed to the wall can be established, and names of visitors recorded there.

ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR VISITING

Be creative and flexible. The plans you have for a visit may not be well-suited for the person with dementia at that time. Put your agenda aside to meet the needs of the person in the moment.

- Go for a walk (or wheel)
- Share a coffee and a special treat
- Enjoy a CD of their favourite music
- Watch a TV show or a DVD of old favourites
- Reminisce about favourite times
- Play cards and adapt and simplify as needed.
- Bring flowers and a vase. Arrange them together.
- Provide a hand massage or a manicure.
- Assist with personal care, such as helping the person with dementia shave or to style their hair.
- Read cards and letters.
- Read short articles or browse the newspaper together.
- Include family pets on visits. Clarify the policies of any home about pet visits.
- Browse photo albums.

SPECIAL VISITS

Intergenerational Visits

- Young children often bring delight. When they visit, have them bring along a couple of their favourite toys for a “show and tell”.
- Plan an activity that both the person with dementia and the child can enjoy, like a balloon toss. A walk to a neighborhood park with a small child can also make for a very pleasant visit.

Holiday Visits

- Family rituals and holiday events are important for everyone. Over time, you will need to adapt family rituals to better support the person with dementia.
- Decorating together provides a fun visit and a connection to times past.
- Try to arrange more frequent visits with less people at a time. Remember, people with dementia often find it difficult to follow conversations, and their confusion increases when more than one or two people are present.
- Using gift bags are much easier for the person with dementia to handle. When possible, avoid wrapped gifts.

