

Supporting Customers who have Dementia

FACT SHEET

Signs to look out for

A person with dementia is likely to appear confused and disorientated or, they may lack insight or be stubborn about particular issues. There is no singular presentation, however the most common are memory loss and confusion.

Repetitive questioning or the inability to follow simple instructions may be a first indication that something is 'not quite right' and the way you respond will have an affect on the outcome of the situation. Whilst not all people who present with these signs will have dementia you should take a moment to consider, 'is it dementia?' when interacting with customers.

The person with dementia may not be able to distinguish between uniforms particularly if they have had experiences (negative or positive) with uniformed individuals in the past. Uniforms may signify ambulance, military, police, prison guards instead of customer support. The person may make an attempt to rationalise or challenge what is happening as they are interacting with you. They might use resistive behaviour as they may connect the uniform with previous incidences from their life.

It is important to recognise that their response may seem abnormal to the situation or your experience, but to them it makes sense. Consider how you might respond if you had an experience as a prisoner of war – uniforms may make you feel uncomfortable, and in trouble.

Communication Considerations

Certain behaviours are easier to understand if you suspect or know the person has dementia and these considerations will help you explore situations further. It is important to try not to react to what someone with dementia may be saying as they may be unaware of the impact. Of course safety is paramount and your organisational processes and procedures should support your own and other customers' safety. Where possible, take a moment to consider if your interaction may be escalating the situation and if you can, choose alternative responses.

If possible be 'in the moment' and attempt to connect with the person through acknowledging their experience. This may be challenging within your environment and where possible moving to a quieter location with additional support is a good option.

The following tips for communication may further assist you.

- Genuine and calm reassurance will potentially bring about better outcomes so where possible read the emotion, body language and tone of voice rather than the words used.
- Repeated questions from the person with dementia may be an indicator of increased confusion, stress or fear. The result may be someone asking for something that is not relevant within what is currently happening, such as asking for their mother/husband/wife (even if deceased). This usually signifies a need for security and comfort. The response to this should be reassurance and validation of their emotions, even when you don't have the full information available.

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- Reminiscence and diversion may assist to calm someone down and establish feelings of security. It can help someone to tell you about themselves and their life history and may also assist with distracting from their current point of focus.

- By using someone's name, it reminds them you know who they are and a connection has been established. You may need to continually reintroduce yourself and your purpose for being there and if so, do this calmly and reassuringly with as little frustration as possible. Model these behaviours for others to use.

- Look for signs that may indicate the person has dementia if you do not personally know them (e.g. 'In Case of Emergency' medical alert bracelet)

- Try not to react to what someone with dementia may be saying. If possible be 'in the moment' and connect with the person through acknowledging the insecurity felt.

Consider sharing information within your service if you have repeated incidences with a person who may have dementia to ensure there is awareness for others who might be interacting with that customer. Flag the issues with your supervisor or call centre and consider putting a plan in place to support future interactions.

Consider the impact of environment on people with dementia. People with dementia work well in familiar and consistent environments and even minor changes to routine can cause anxiety and agitation. Your environment may be an additional stressor and anything you can do to support them will provide a positive outcome for both parties.

Consider developing individual plans for your unit or team in the future for working with people with dementia – these could include dementia specific pathways

Final thoughts

Dementia is a disability. Where and whenever it is possible remember to consider:

- Your approach
- Your body language
- The language and words you use
- Environmental stressors (frantic/busy environments are distressing so move to a quieter area when practical)

If possible nominate a contact person within your unit or team to support the person with dementia until further help arrives. This may involve calling supervisors or call centres for further support

If a person with dementia is lost and you are unable to contact family members to support them please contact the police who will assist in supporting the person to return home.

Where to from here? For more information or support please contact the Alzheimer's Society National Dementia Helpline 0300 222 11 22