

Loss of recognition in people with dementia



As dementia progresses, many people will stop recognising those around them – even people who are close to them. This can be upsetting for family, friends and colleagues, as well as the person themselves. Trying to remind the person who these people are can be confusing and frustrating for them.

But despite the challenges, it is important to try to maintain connections between the person with dementia and the people they are close to. This will help the person feel safe and comfortable, and moments of recognition can bring happiness to everyone.

What causes loss of recognition?

Difficulty recognising people may be the result of memory loss in a person with dementia. Often, people struggle with short-term memory, but older memories remain clear. This means that the person may remember you as you were many years ago and expect you to look like your younger self, and not recognise you as the same person.

Some people with dementia appear to travel back in time, reliving memories from when they were younger. This could cause confusion about how they are related to the people who are close to them. They might think their grown-up children are still young and not recognise who they are as adults. They might think parents or other people who have died are still alive. They may believe they are still in a relationship with a previous spouse or partner and not recognise their current partner.

The person with dementia may have problems with communication, including word-finding. This may mean that they forget the names of family, friends and colleagues or call them by the wrong name. Language and communication issues can be an early sign of young onset dementia (where symptoms develop before the age of 65).



In some people, the part of the brain that is responsible for recognising faces can become damaged. This is referred to as ‘prosopagnosia’, or ‘face blindness’.

The person may also have delusions that cause them to believe things that are not true – for example, that a family member or friend is a stranger in their home.

Some people with dementia experience Capgras syndrome, which is a belief that someone close to them – often their partner – has been replaced by an imposter, or even a clone. This is more common in Lewy body dementia. Please see Sources of support on p11 for information on Capgras syndrome.

Difficulty with recognising familiar people does not happen in all types of dementia. It is more common in Alzheimer’s disease, for instance, and less in vascular dementia. However, in the later stages of dementia, it is likely that most people will have trouble recognising family, friends and carers.

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If the person is failing to recognise you or others for the first time, appears particularly confused or seems distressed in your company, it is worth them seeing their GP. They can check for potentially treatable causes such as infection, constipation, dehydration, side effects of medication or delirium (a state of sudden confusion – see Sources of support on p14 for information).

However, it is important to realise that this is a natural progression of dementia, and that the person may never return to recognising people like they used to.

Methods for encouraging recognition

- Put up photos around their home of important times the person with dementia spent with you and other people, such as weddings, the birth of children, birthdays, parties and holidays
- Show the progression of time in these photos to help the person see that the people close to them have changed over time – for example, you could put up photos of their child as a baby, as a teenager, at various points in their adult life and as they appear now
- Try naming objects as you talk about them – this can help with object recognition
- Keep a photo album on display with the pictures clearly marked with people's names and their relationship to the person with dementia, the year and the event, following the progression from the past to the present day
- Talk about experiences you shared in the past
- Wear clothes or accessories that the person associates with you, eg a favourite jumper, scarf or piece of jewellery



- Wear aftershave or perfume that the person associates with you
- Try creating a life story – a record of the person’s past and present life that can be used to encourage reminiscence. See Sources of support on p10 for information
- Make sure the person uses any communication aids such as glasses or hearing aids

Tips for when someone does not recognise you

- Keep yourself in the person’s eyeline and try not to suddenly appear from the side or from behind
- Speak clearly and in short sentences
- Put yourself on the same level as them – for example, if they are sitting, sit beside them – and make eye contact
- Be reassuring; smile at the person, keep your body language

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relaxed, and hold their hand or stroke their arm if they feel comfortable with this

- If the person is struggling to recognise you, introduce yourself and explain the connection between you, for instance, “Hello Mum, it’s Julie, your daughter”
- Whenever you see the person with dementia – even if it is just a few hours since you last saw them – reintroduce yourself, again using your name and your relationship to them, for example, “Hello David, it’s your sister, Sue”
- Refer to other people by their names rather than as ‘he/she’
- Introduce visitors by name and relationship, for example, “This is Meera – you used to work together”
- If the person is getting agitated or upset, go into another room for a few minutes before coming back in calmly and saying something like, “Hello, I’m back now, how lovely to see you”
- Avoid correcting the person if they get your name wrong or say something that is not true; this can lead to distress
- Try to stay calm and do not take it personally – these changes are caused by the person’s dementia and are not intentional
- Explain to other people that the person with dementia may have difficulty recognising them so they are prepared that this might happen

Finding other ways to connect

It can be very upsetting when someone with dementia stops recognising you, but there are things you can do to maintain a connection with them.



If you can, try entering into the person's world. If they are focusing on a particular time in their life, engage in conversation about this period and ask about their memories.

Try not to remind the person with dementia of more recent realities that they are having trouble grasping, such as having to give up work or the death of a loved one, as this can cause distress and confusion. Instead, talk about happy memories and events that are important to them.

Taking part in activities together can also be a good way to help you feel closer, for example:

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- playing some familiar music
- watching a favourite film or TV programme
- drawing, painting or craft
- doing some exercise together
- involving them in activities that give them purpose – for example, household tasks, gardening, washing the car or shopping
- going for a walk and talking about the things you see
- doing puzzles or jigsaws or playing games, if possible

If the person with dementia does not recognise you, this does not necessarily mean they have forgotten you. Even if they do not seem to know who you are, they may recognise your voice or sense that you are someone special to them and feel comforted by your presence.

Supporting children when someone stops recognising them

It can be very upsetting for children and young people if a relative stops recognising them – especially if it is a parent. It is important to be honest and offer a clear, age-appropriate explanation of what is happening.

You could explain that sometimes, people with dementia struggle to remember names or faces – and because our faces change as we get older, the person may expect the child to look the same as they did when they were younger. Make sure the child knows that this is not the person's fault – it is because dementia is changing the way their brain works and causing problems with their memory and their ability to recognise faces.

Explain that while their relative may not recognise them or recall their name, they are still likely to know that they have a special bond with



them and enjoy spending time with them even if they cannot express it. You could suggest ways to encourage this closeness – for example, the child could read to their family member or look at picture books with them; draw pictures for them; tell them what they have been doing at home and at school; dance, sing or play an instrument; or look at photos and talk about their memories.

Children may feel a sense of loss and rejection and are likely to need a lot of reassurance if someone close stops recognising them. It may help them to talk about their feelings with a family member, friend or teacher. It is a good idea to talk to the child’s school about what is happening so they can offer extra support and look for signs that they are not coping. If necessary, they may be able to refer the child to a school counsellor.

You can also use books and videos to help the child understand dementia and how it affects a person’s memory: please see Sources of support on p10-11 for our information resources for children and young people.

Sources of support

If you are living with dementia or caring for someone with the condition, register for our free online sessions, ‘Dementia: what next?’ at [▶ dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next](https://dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next)

To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse, call our free Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday–Friday 9am–9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am–5pm, every day except 25th December) or email [▶ helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

If you prefer, you can book a phone or video call with an Admiral Nurse at a time to suit you: please visit [▶ dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

Dementia UK resources

Changes in perception and hallucinations

[▶ dementiauk.org/changes-in-perception](https://dementiauk.org/changes-in-perception)

Changes in relationships and roles

[▶ dementiauk.org/changing-relationships-and-roles](https://dementiauk.org/changing-relationships-and-roles)

Creating a life story

[▶ dementiauk.org/life-story](https://dementiauk.org/life-story)

Delirium

[▶ dementiauk.org/delirium](https://dementiauk.org/delirium)

Dementia books for children

[▶ dementiauk.org/dementia-books-for-children](https://dementiauk.org/dementia-books-for-children)

False beliefs and delusions

[▶ dementiauk.org/false-beliefs](https://dementiauk.org/false-beliefs)

Lewy body dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/dementia-with-lewy-bodies](https://dementiauk.org/dementia-with-lewy-bodies)

Looking after yourself as a carer

➤ dementiauk.org/looking-after-yourself-when-youre-caring

Music therapy

➤ dementiauk.org/music

Stages of dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/stages-of-dementia

Sundowning

➤ dementiauk.org/sundowning

Supporting children and adolescents when a child has young onset dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/supporting-children

Tips for better communication

➤ dementiauk.org/better-communication

Other resources

‘Let’s talk about dementia’ film for children

➤ youtube.com/watch?v=3kpD-Uykmww

Managing delusions, misidentification and Capgras syndrome in Lewy body dementia (in collaboration with the Lewy Body Society)

➤ lewybody.org/managing-delusions-misidentification-and-capgras-syndrome

To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse about any aspect of dementia:

Contact our Helpline:

0800 888 6678 or [▶ helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

Book a virtual appointment:

[▶ dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

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- Call **0300 365 5500**
- Visit [▶ dementiauk.org/donate](https://dementiauk.org/donate)
- Scan the QR code



Thank you.



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Helping families face dementia



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