



**DementiaUK**  
Helping families face dementia

## The use of dolls in dementia care (doll therapy)



## What is doll therapy?

The use of lifelike dolls or soft toy animals can have great benefits for some people with dementia, particularly those in the middle to later stages. It is sometimes known as doll therapy and is not merely ‘playing with a toy’ – it can have therapeutic benefits such as promoting relaxation and feelings of comfort and pleasure.

## The benefits of doll therapy for people with dementia

There is evidence showing that the use of dolls or soft toy animals can be helpful for people with dementia who find it difficult to engage with others or who are restless, distressed or anxious. For example, it can improve their mood, wellbeing and ability to communicate.

Some people with dementia get enjoyment from holding or playing with a doll or soft toy animal, such as a cat or dog – or even just from having one nearby. It might remind them of a time when they had young children or a pet of their own, and create pleasant

feelings of reminiscence or affection, even if they are unable to communicate them.

This can be particularly useful if the person experiences ‘sundowning’. This is a state of intense confusion and anxiety that typically occurs in the evening – for example, the person with dementia may feel a strong need to go home, even if they are already home, or to collect their child from school, even if they are grown up. Having a doll or toy animal to focus on at this time of day may ease these feelings of distress and insecurity.

Some family members find that giving the person with dementia a doll or soft toy animal can help them to connect with the outside world. It might encourage communication by prompting conversations about the toy and their feelings towards it. They may enjoy showing other people the doll or soft toy and telling them about it.

It may also give them a renewed sense of purpose through the act of ‘caring for’ the doll or soft toy. They might, for instance, like to talk to it, brush its hair, wrap it in a blanket



or put it to bed. This could lead to increased levels of activity and motivation and lift their mood.

Some people with dementia enjoy the physical sensation of holding something soothing and take comfort from cradling, cuddling or stroking the doll or toy animal. This may help to reduce distressed behaviour like shouting, fidgeting or pacing.

Dolls and soft toys can also be a good way to help the person with dementia connect with younger members of the family, such as grandchildren or, in the case of people with young onset dementia (where symptoms develop before the age of 65), their own children. Playing with, talking about or nurturing the toy together can help them interact with each other, whether verbally or non-

verbally. This can be valuable both for the person with dementia and the child.

### Tips for giving a doll or soft animal to the person you care for

- Introduce the doll or soft toy animal gradually. You could place it on a chair before the person enters the room. Watch to see how – and if – they respond
- You could offer the person a choice of different dolls or soft animals to pick from
- Some companies sell very realistic baby dolls and animated soft toy animals, which may be marketed as being for people with dementia. However, there is no need to make an expensive purchase – ordinary dolls and cuddly toys can be just as effective
- Let the person discover the doll or soft animal in their own time
- If they show an interest, you can encourage them by saying things like, “Would you like to pick it up?” or, “Shall I put it on your lap?”
- If they show no interest in it, do not worry too much about drawing their attention to it. You can always try another day – but be aware that some people simply don’t find dolls or soft toys engaging

### Important things to consider

If the person engages with a doll or soft toy voluntarily and seems to be finding it beneficial, this could form part of their care plan and be tailored to their individual needs.

This is also important when dolls or soft animals are introduced into a group setting such as a care home – it should not be assumed that every resident will find it helpful, and the specific needs of each person should be considered.

These are some other points to bear in mind.

- Not everyone will want to interact with a doll or soft animal. If the person shows no interest, do not press the doll or soft toy upon them
- Try to avoid using toys that make a noise – eg crying



noises or barking – as this may cause distress for the person with dementia and the people around them, such as other care home residents

- Take care not to treat the person with dementia like a child – remember that this is a form of therapy, not just play
- It is important to discuss your plans to introduce a doll or soft

toy with other members of the person’s family. Sometimes, family members feel that their relative is being patronised or treated with indignity. They may also see them caring for their toy as evidence of how their condition is deteriorating, which may be upsetting. Explaining what you are doing and the potential benefits may help ease any concerns

- Some people with dementia become very attached to a doll or soft animal. They may be upset if children or care home staff or residents pick the doll or soft toy up. You can help to prevent this by putting the toy away if the person has young visitors, or keeping it in their bedroom rather than bringing it into communal areas
- If the person with dementia has carers coming into their home or is in residential care, ensure that their care staff understand that the doll or soft toy is important to them so they can try to prevent it being misplaced or handled by other people
- If the person seems to believe that the toy is real – for example, referring to it as a ‘baby’ rather than a doll – don’t try to correct them, as this may cause distress and confusion

### Doll therapy and self-care

Sometimes, a person with dementia may start neglecting their own needs to prioritise the doll or soft animal – for instance, putting it in their bed while they sleep in a chair, or trying to give it their food.

Watch for these signs and consider how you could work around any issues. For example, you could keep the doll or animal in another place during mealtimes and encourage the person to interact with it early in the day rather than close to bedtime.

You could also introduce the idea of someone else ‘babysitting’ the doll or soft animal so the act of caring for it doesn’t restrict the person from taking part in meaningful activities – you could suggest that you ‘babysit’ while the person attends a day centre or goes for a walk with another family member.

If the person forms an attachment to the doll or soft animal, it is a good idea to buy a duplicate if possible in case the toy gets lost or broken or needs to be cleaned.

## Sources of support

To speak to a specialist dementia nurse about the use of dolls or soft toy animals or any other aspect of dementia, please call our Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday to Friday 9am–9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am–5pm) or email [helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

To book a phone or video call appointment with an Admiral Nurse, please visit [dementiauk.org/closer-to-home](https://dementiauk.org/closer-to-home)

### Dementia UK resources

**Creating a ‘Life Story’ for a person with dementia**  
[dementiauk.org/creating-a-life-story](https://dementiauk.org/creating-a-life-story)

**Advance Care Plans**  
[dementiauk.org/advance-care-planning](https://dementiauk.org/advance-care-planning)

**Managing anxiety and depression in a person with dementia**  
[dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety](https://dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety)

**Coping with distress**  
[dementiauk.org/coping-with-distress](https://dementiauk.org/coping-with-distress)

**Dealing with restlessness**  
[dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness](https://dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness)

**Sundowning**  
[dementiauk.org/sundowning](https://dementiauk.org/sundowning)

**Good habits for bedtime**  
[dementiauk.org/good-habits-for-bedtime](https://dementiauk.org/good-habits-for-bedtime)

**Tips for better communication**  
[dementiauk.org/tips-for-better-communication](https://dementiauk.org/tips-for-better-communication)

**Meaningful activities for a person with dementia**  
[dementiauk.org/meaningful-activities-for-a-person-with-dementia](https://dementiauk.org/meaningful-activities-for-a-person-with-dementia)

**Learning disabilities and dementia**  
[dementiauk.org/learning-disabilities-and-dementia](https://dementiauk.org/learning-disabilities-and-dementia)

The information in this booklet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses.

We are always looking to improve our resources, to provide the most relevant support for families living with dementia. If you have feedback about any of our leaflets, please email [feedback@dementiauk.org](mailto:feedback@dementiauk.org)

We receive no government funding and rely on voluntary donations, including gifts in Wills.

For more information on how to support Dementia UK, please visit [dementiauk.org/donate](https://dementiauk.org/donate) or call **0300 365 5500**.  
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If you're caring for someone with dementia or if you have any other concerns or questions, call or email our Admiral Nurses for specialist support and advice.

Call **0800 888 6678** or email [helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

Open Monday-Friday, 9am-9pm  
Saturday and Sunday, 9am-5pm



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