



DementiaUK

Helping families face dementia



Sex, intimacy and dementia

**Caring for someone
with dementia**

Sex, intimacy and dementia

Talking about sex and intimacy can be a sensitive subject and difficult to discuss. You may feel embarrassed or disloyal to your partner when talking about such personal matters to another person. We hope that this leaflet will help you feel more able to have a conversation with a professional, should you wish to do so. In this leaflet, we will look at possible changes in relationships that may occur as a result of a partner's dementia. It is important to remember that having dementia does not have to mean the end of an intimate relationship.

What is intimacy?

Intimacy can take many different forms and does not just relate to sexual activity. For some couples, intimacy could be physical and take the form of sex, touching, a massage or cuddling. For others intimacy could be spending time relaxing with each other, having a shared history together or simply laughing together.

As relationships grow and change, couples may find new ways of sharing closeness and exploring what intimacy means for them. It is important to remember that intimacy is different for each couple and it could be helpful to talk through any relationship changes with someone you can trust.



Changing relationships

As a person's dementia progresses, it is possible that there may be changes in their relationship with others. This can be complex both for the person and those around them, especially their partners.

An example of a changing relationship could include one person expressing more interest in having a sexual relationship than the other. Another change could be that the person living with dementia may have an inability to recognise and acknowledge previous and/or existing relationships. In some cases, the person with dementia may transfer their affection to others. All of which can be very upsetting and can add a strain on to a relationship.



If your partner has become more interested in sexual activity and you do not feel you can meet this need then it is important to think of how to find a balance for you both. It may be that you explore different ways of being intimate such as a massage or cuddle. If your partner is less interested in sex and intimacy it is equally important that you respect this decision.

If there are any changes in your relationship it may help to share your concerns with someone, such as an Admiral Nurse, in order to gain some support. It may be possible that together you can find a way to meet both partners' needs.

Consent

As a person's dementia progresses, it may reduce their ability to consent to sexual activity. It is important that consent is given prior to any sexual activity taking place. Consent can take many forms and may be non-verbal, for example if the person living with dementia responds positively with obvious enjoyment when their partner makes sexual advances, then there is every reason to believe that the partner with dementia is consenting to have sex. Alternatively, if their level of response, enjoyment or willingness diminishes then this could be an indication that there is no consent to sex and this should be respected.

In some cases dementia can also heighten sexual desire. However, this can be complex, particularly when a partner of someone living with dementia does not want to participate in sexual activity. If this was to occur it would be beneficial to discuss this with a professional as it is just as important for the partner of a person living with dementia to consent to being intimate.

It is important to remember that consent is ongoing and can fluctuate. If the person living with dementia consents on one occasion, it does not mean they will consent the next and vice versa.

Consent can be very complex and if you are concerned about any of these issues you can call the **Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline on 0800 888 6678** for practical advice.

Opening hours are 9am-9pm Monday-Friday and 9am-5pm Saturday and Sunday.

Resources

Pulsford D, Thompson R, (2013) *Dementia: Support for family and friends*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London



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

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 www.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.

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