The use of dolls in dementia care
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The use of life-like dolls or soft toy animals can bring great benefits to some people with a diagnosis of dementia, particularly those in later stages. Giving life-like dolls or animals to people with dementia is considered by some as a type of therapy; it has therapeutic benefits such as relaxation and pleasure and is not merely ‘playing’ with a toy.

What are the benefits for people with dementia?

Some people with dementia may find that they get enjoyment from holding or simply being with a doll or soft toy animal, such as a cat or dog. It might remind them of a time when they had young children or a pet of their own or simply create pleasant feelings of reminiscence or affection.
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Tips on 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.

- Let the person discover the doll or soft animal in their own time. If they show no interest in it, do not worry too much about drawing their attention to it. You can always try another day.

Some family members find that giving the person they care for a doll or soft toy animal can help them to connect with the outside world. Some people with dementia can enjoy the sensation of holding something soothing, and it can inspire a renewed sense of purpose, which can lead to increased activity levels and liveliness.

There is evidence showing that the use of dolls or soft toy animals can be particularly helpful for those who may not be engaging with others, or who are restless, distressed or anxious, improving their well-being and ability to communicate.
• If the person with dementia is interested in the doll or soft animal, use it as a way to connect with them. You could ask them questions about the doll or soft animal, referring to it as “he, she, or they”

• If they aren’t able to answer questions about the doll or soft animal, consider making observations about it to them instead, for example: “what a nice face”, “what a lovely dress”, or for an animal “what lovely fur”, “it looks like (name of their pet from the past)”
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Important things to consider

The use of dolls or soft animals to reduce distress for a person with dementia should always be considered as part of the person’s care plan, responding to their individual needs. This is equally as important when dolls or soft animals are being introduced into a group setting such as a care home.

The individual needs of the person should be discussed with and considered by each member of staff.

- 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 animal upon them.
- Some people dislike seeing a person with dementia with a doll or toy animal – they might think the person is being treated like a child. It is important to allow the person with dementia to make their own decisions about using a doll, and to help other people understand those decisions.
- It is important to discuss your plans with other members of the person’s family to discover their
views. Explaining the benefits and the evidence may help soothe any concerns.

- Some people with dementia may become very attached to a doll or soft animal. Grandchildren or other residents in a care home may pick up the doll or soft animal which could prove upsetting. Consider using the doll or soft animal at times when this is less likely to happen, and consider providing other objects or toys for people to engage with, if this is likely.

- The person 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 of attachment and consider using the doll or animal away from meal times and early in the day rather than close to bedtime.

- Try to avoid using dolls that make a noise e.g. crying noises, as this may cause distress.
Sources of support

Dementia UK resource on Creating a ‘Life Story’
www.dementiauk.org/creating-a-life-story

Dementia UK leaflet on Lasting power of attorney
www.dementiauk.org/last-power-of-attorney

Dementia UK resource on Advance Care Plans
www.dementiauk.org/advance-care-planning

Dementia UK leaflet on Managing anxiety and depression in a person with dementia
www.dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety

Dementia UK leaflet on the Emotional impact of the diagnosis
www.dementiauk.org/emotional-impact

Our Admiral Nurses can help

If you have any questions or concerns about dementia, you can call the dementia specialist Admiral Nurses on our Helpline for free.

Call 0800 888 6678 or email helpline@dementiauk.org

Opening hours:
Monday-Friday, 9am-9pm
Saturday-Sunday, 9am-5pm
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**

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

www.dementiauk.org  •  info@dementiauk.org

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Dementia UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1039404) and Scotland (SCO47429).