

Understanding denial and lack of insight



What is denial?

Denial is a very common reaction in people who are showing early signs and symptoms of dementia, as well as among their family and friends. They are likely to be worried about what is happening and how it will change their life, and may try to find another explanation for the changes they are experiencing, such as normal ageing, tiredness, health problems, relationship issues and work stress.

It is also common for people to believe that they have been misdiagnosed, or in the case of younger people, that they are too young to have dementia.

Denial can be defined as a refusal to acknowledge and accept something unpleasant or the reality of a situation, even when it is obvious to others. It is a defence mechanism that helps people manage their fear and anxiety around these difficult situations, such as the possibility of dementia.

Over time, the person with signs of dementia and their family will likely begin to recognise that the changes they are observing are progressing. They will often realise – or be persuaded – that their symptoms need investigating by a healthcare professional.

If a person has recently been diagnosed with dementia and they and/or their family are reluctant to accept this, it is likely that in time, they will move through their denial and recognise the need for support, although some people never reach a state of acceptance.

Why does denial occur?

Research has shown that dementia is the most feared health condition in the UK, especially for people over the age of 40. Reasons for this include:

- worries over losing control and independence
- fear of what will happen in the future



- knowing that there is currently no cure
- lack of understanding of dementia
- seeing other people with dementia and how it affects them
- stigma and discrimination
- the media's portrayal of dementia

Fears about being diagnosed with dementia may lead to the person denying that they are experiencing symptoms and refusing to seek medical advice. The person's family, friends or colleagues may notice the changes first, but may not want to mention their concerns to avoid upsetting them. They may be worried that their relationship will be affected if they raise the issue, or that it is not their place to say anything.

In addition, it is easy to attribute the early signs and symptoms of dementia to other causes, for example concentration issues to stress or lack of sleep; difficulty remembering where things are to other people moving things; or memory lapses to advancing age.

4 Dementia UK

Denial can be a particular issue if the person is younger, as many people wrongly assume that dementia is a condition of old age. The person and their family may put the changes down to other issues such as menopause, work stress or the pressures of family life.

Denial can also be a problem if someone is experiencing a rarer form of dementia – which tends to be more common in younger people. In rarer types, memory loss may not be one of the early symptoms, which may lead the person to think that they do not have dementia.

What is lack of insight?

Lack of insight is when someone lacks awareness of their own dementia signs and symptoms, such as changes in behaviour and difficulty regulating their emotions. This can cause frustration and distress for the person themselves and those around them – for example, if the person is reluctant to seek a diagnosis or accept support.

Why does lack of insight occur?

In some forms of dementia, the frontal lobe of the brain (the area immediately behind the forehead) can be affected. This area controls insight as well as other abilities such as judgement; decision-making; sequencing and planning; and memory and concentration.

People who have frontal lobe damage – for example those with frontotemporal dementia – often lack insight into the changes in their mood, behaviour and social functioning. This can cause difficulties in their family life, relationships and employment. Please see Sources of support on p10 for our information on frontotemporal dementia.

The impact of denial and lack of insight

If a person with signs and symptoms of dementia and/or their family are in denial about what is happening, it can lead to:

- a delay in getting an assessment to rule out other potentially treatable conditions
- a delay in accessing treatment, advice and support, including medication that may help to slow the progression of certain types of dementia
- delays in getting help with daily living and applying for benefits
- mental ill health (eg depression and anxiety) due to worrying about what is happening
- relationship changes: the person and their family may find it difficult to talk about their concerns or have differing viewpoints on what is happening and what to do
- distress for children who may think they are to blame for the changes in their parent or other relative's behaviour
- avoidance of social situations, resulting in loneliness and isolation
- the person continuing to drive when it may be unsafe for them to do so
- problems at work – such as making mistakes or failing to complete tasks – which may be put down to carelessness or laziness
- the person being taken in by scams and fraudulent activity, which may be avoided if they have the right support

If the person is reluctant to request or accept an assessment or support, it may affect their health – for example, if they refuse help from professionals, family and friends, it may increase the risk of falls, accidents in the home, nutritional problems and mistakes with taking medication.

When someone has dementia, it is important to plan ahead – for example, by discussing their wishes for their future health and social care. This can be difficult if the person or their family are in denial about what is happening.

It can also lead to a delay in making financial and legal arrangements such as applying for lasting power of attorney (in England and Wales; the equivalent in Scotland is called power of attorney, and in Northern Ireland, enduring power of attorney) and writing a Will. This may mean that the person loses capacity to share their views and give their informed consent around future plans.

In certain cases, denial and lack of insight can lead to significant distress and heightened emotions within the family. This may, in turn, result in verbally or physically aggressive behaviour. For example, a person with confirmed or suspected dementia who refuses to accept support from family members may react negatively when assistance is offered.

Tips for coping with denial

Often, with time and space, people who are in denial will come to accept their dementia symptoms or diagnosis, so give the person time to speak about their fears and worries, listen to what they are saying and respond accordingly.

If the person is reluctant to see their GP, explain the benefits of doing so. For example, you could say that their symptoms may be due to another condition that could be treated; or that if it is dementia, getting support in place as soon as possible could help them maintain their independence and quality of life.

If the person is still unwilling to seek advice, you could contact their GP explaining your concerns, for example what is happening, for how long, and how it affects the person and those around them. The GP



will not be able to breach the person's confidentiality by discussing their medical care with you, but may call them in for a health check. You could also ask another family member or friend to speak to the person – sometimes, people are more willing to accept advice from someone who is slightly detached from the situation.

Spend some time thinking about the issues that the person is concerned about, and the possible solutions to these – if they can see ways around the problems that they may encounter, they may be able to work through their denial. For example, if they are worried that a dementia diagnosis will mean they have to stop driving, you can explain that many people with dementia can continue to drive for some time. Or if they are worried that they will have to give up work, you could come up with a list of reasonable adjustments that their employer could put in place to help them remain in work, with legal protection from discrimination. Please see Sources of support on p10 for our information on driving and employment for people with dementia.

You can also develop a long-term plan together – but while it is important to think about issues like applying for lasting power of attorney and discussing the person’s wishes for future care, make sure you also focus on what they can still do, and may be able to do for some time, rather than on what they cannot do now or may not be able to do in the future.

Denial in family members

If you are finding it hard to accept a dementia diagnosis in a loved one, support is available. You can speak to your GP, look for local or online carers’ groups, or contact our dementia specialist Admiral Nurses – please see Sources of support on p10 for details.

If family members are in denial about the person’s dementia symptoms or diagnosis, take the time to explain the signs you have noticed. You could keep a diary of symptoms to show them, or give them our information on signs and types of dementia (please see Sources of support on p11).

If a child or teenager is struggling to accept a dementia diagnosis in a family member, ensure you explain the changes in age-appropriate language and give them time to talk – there are lots of books and resources for children of different ages to help them understand dementia. Please see Sources of support on p11. Our Consultant Admiral Nurse for Children and Young People can also offer support; please contact our Helpline if you would like to be referred.

Tips for coping with lack of insight

People who have damage to the frontal lobe of the brain may not accept that they are experiencing the changes other people are describing. They are less likely to attend the GP voluntarily or agree to an assessment if they do not believe anything is wrong.

It can be very difficult for families to cope with a lack of insight in the person with possible or confirmed dementia, but these tips may help:

- Avoid arguments and confrontation – remember that the person’s lack of insight is due to physical changes in the brain and is not intentional
- If the person is reluctant to see the GP for a dementia assessment, encourage them to book a general health check; you can contact the surgery beforehand to let the doctor know about your concerns, which will help guide the appointment
- If possible, attend the person’s appointment with them so you can share your observations with the GP
- Try to find out how the person is feeling and what they are concerned about and give time for them to respond, as they may then find it easier to identify some of the issues they are facing
- Provide non-critical feedback, information and support when an issue occurs
- Try to focus on the person’s strengths and what they can still do – they can still have a good quality of life and take part in activities they enjoy
- Be aware that the person’s decision-making and judgement may also be affected, and this may lead to impulsive behaviour
- Seek professional support and advice about how to manage lack of insight – your GP may be able to recommend support groups or dementia training, or you can contact our Admiral Nurses (see Sources of support on p10)

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

Books about dementia for children

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

Different symptoms of young onset dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/young-onset-dementia-different-symptoms](https://dementiauk.org/young-onset-dementia-different-symptoms)

Driving and dementia

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

Employment and young onset dementia

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

Frontotemporal dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/frontotemporal-dementia](https://dementiauk.org/frontotemporal-dementia)

Getting a diagnosis of dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/how-to-get-a-diagnosis-of-dementia](https://dementiauk.org/how-to-get-a-diagnosis-of-dementia)

Lasting power of attorney

➤ dementiauk.org/lasting-power-of-attorney

Stigma and discrimination

➤ dementiauk.org/dealing-with-stigma

Supporting children and adolescents when a parent has young onset dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/supporting-children

Symptoms of dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/symptoms-of-dementia

Types of dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/types-of-dementia

Understanding young onset dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/what-is-young-onset-dementia

Other resources

Carers UK

➤ carersuk.org

Dementia Carers Count: free support courses for family carers

➤ dementiacarers.org.uk

Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project (DEEP): a network of groups of people living with dementia

➤ dementiavoices.org.uk

Rare Dementia Support

➤ raredementiasupport.org

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)

Our charity relies entirely on donations to fund our life-changing work. If you would like to donate to help us support more families:

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



Thank you.



DementiaUK

Helping families face dementia



dementiauk.org • info@dementiauk.org

Publication date: October 2025. Review date: October 2028. © Dementia UK 2025

Dementia UK, 7th Floor, One Aldgate, London EC3N 1RE

Dementia UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1039404) and Scotland (SC 047429).