



DementiaUK

Helping families face dementia

Dementia and loss of recognition

Things to try when someone stops recognising you



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 it is important to maintain these connections – this will help them 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. They might expect

grown-up children to be small again, or expect their parents to still be alive, or even think they are still in a relationship with a previous spouse or partner.

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

The person with dementia may have problems with communication, including word-finding. This may mean that they forget people’s names or call them by the wrong name.

They may also have delusions that cause them to believe things that aren’t 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with dementia experience Capgras syndrome, which is a belief that someone close to them – often their partner – has been replaced by an imposter, or even a clone.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 p7 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 rarer in vascular dementia. However, in the later stages of dementia, it is likely that most people will have trouble recognising family, friends, colleagues and carers.

If the person is failing to recognise you or others for the first time 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 p7 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 prompting a person's memory

- Put up photos around their home of important times they 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 them 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, on their wedding day and as they appear now
- Keep a photo album on display with the photos 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 their past and present life that can be used to encourage reminiscence. See Sources of support on p7 for information

Tips for when someone doesn't 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 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”
 - When you see the person with dementia – even if it's just a few hours since you last saw them – reintroduce yourself, again using your name and your relationship to them, for example, “Hello David, I'm your sister, Sue”
 - Refer to other people by their names rather than as ‘he/she’
- Introduce visitors, for example, “This is Meera – you used to work together”
 - If the person is getting agitated, 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 isn't true; this can lead to distress
 - Try to stay calm and not take it personally – these changes are caused by the person's dementia and are not deliberate

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 the person is 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're having trouble grasping, such as having to give up work or the death of a parent, 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:

- 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

Remember, not being recognised doesn't mean the person has totally forgotten you. Even if they don't 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 with young onset dementia (where symptoms develop before the age of 65).

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 their parent or grandparent'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 can't 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've 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 close family member, friend, teacher, or counsellor.

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 p7 for our information resources for children and young people.

Sources of support

To speak to a specialist dementia nurse about what to do when someone stops recognising you 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

To book a phone or video call appointment with an Admiral Nurse, please visit dementiauk.org/book-a-clinic-appointment

Dementia UK resources

Stages of dementia

dementiauk.org/stages-of-dementia

Creating a life story

dementiauk.org/life-story

Changes in perception and hallucinations

dementiauk.org/changes-in-perception

False beliefs and delusions

dementiauk.org/false-beliefs

Tips for better communication

dementiauk.org/better-communication

Looking after yourself as a carer

dementiauk.org/looking-after-yourself-when-you-care-for-someone

Music therapy

dementiauk.org/music

Sundowning

dementiauk.org/sundowning

Delirium

dementiauk.org/delirium

Dementia books for children

dementiauk.org/dementia-books-for-children

Other resources

‘Let’s talk about dementia’ film for children

youtube.com/watch?v=IjDlf7gQWJs

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

lewybody.org/download/managing-delusions-misidentification-and-capgras-syndrome-in-lewy-body-dementia

The information in this leaflet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses. We hope you find it useful. If you have feedback, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

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Thank you.



If you have questions or concerns about any aspect of dementia, please contact our Admiral Nurses.

Helpline: **0800 888 6678** or helpline@dementiauk.org

Virtual clinics: dementiauk.org/book-a-clinic-appointment



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