



DementiaUK

Helping families face dementia

Faith and dementia

A guide for faith groups and carers





Faith can be a fundamental part of a person's identity, shaping every part of their lives, and for many people affected by dementia, religion continues to play a central role even after their diagnosis.

Faith-based rituals, prayers and songs are often stored in parts of the brain that are less affected by dementia. This means deeply held religious beliefs and practices are often retained, even when other memories and abilities are lost.

As dementia progresses, it can become harder for people to practise their religion. However, with support and adaptations, a person's faith can remain embedded in their life – and their religious groups and family members have an important part to play.

In this guide, you will find advice from our specialist dementia nurses, known as Admiral Nurses, on how to support people with dementia to keep their faith.

Admiral Nurses work on Dementia UK's free Helpline, in online and face-to-face clinics and in the community. They provide expert, compassionate support which recognises the whole person – including what gives their life meaning, such as their faith or spirituality.

Find out more about how we can support you on p10.

The importance of faith in dementia

Admiral Nurse Kerry Lyons shares the benefits of religion and spirituality for a person of faith who is living with dementia.

For many people, faith is woven into who they are. It can shape a person's daily routines, values, language, prayer and relationships. Because of this, it is important to recognise that a person of faith who is living with dementia still has the same spiritual needs, beliefs and sense of identity as before their diagnosis.

People living with dementia may find that faith:

- provides comfort, reassurance and a sense of peace
- helps maintain their identity and provides continuity with their earlier life
- reduces anxiety and distress, particularly in unfamiliar situations
- strengthens feelings of belonging and connection to others
- offers meaning during times of loss or uncertainty

In addition, being part of a faith group often gives the person with dementia and their family a support network and community hub that they can lean on for spiritual, emotional and practical support during difficult times.



Supporting a person with dementia to maintain their faith

If you are supporting someone with dementia, these practical steps can help them stay connected to their faith.



Keeping faith familiar

- People with dementia often remember religious rituals, recitations and prayers, even as their condition progresses. You could try beginning a well-known prayer, blessing or verse, and encouraging the person to join in
- Music is central to many faiths and can unlock memories, language and emotion. If it is appropriate, find out if the person has favourite religious music that holds meaning, for example hymns, songs or chants



Using the senses

- Create a calm, familiar environment for prayer and worship, using soft lighting, gentle music if appropriate, and minimal noise
- Sensory objects related to the person's faith may provide comfort and familiarity – for example prayer beads, a cross, Menorah, prayer mat, shawl, incense, a holy book or items with personal meaning

“My dad, who was from Zimbabwe, grew up with a strong faith, and his community was central to his life. When he developed dementia, maintaining those religious connections remained deeply important. The church men's group regularly visited him. Seeing familiar faces, hearing prayers and conversations he recognised, and still feeling part of his community gave him comfort, reassurance and a sense of belonging.”

Tsitsi, whose dad lived with dementia





Attending worship

- Places of worship can be overwhelming, so try to identify a quiet space where the person can take a break, and connect them with a trusted member of the community who can support them
- Look for dementia-inclusive services, or work with your faith group to develop these – for example with shorter meetings, a relaxed atmosphere and familiar elements that are appropriate to your religion, such as well-known scripture readings, prayers and music
- If attending worship is difficult, explore opportunities for home worship, such as live-streamed services, religious TV or radio programmes or small-group visits



Routine and rituals

- Religious routines can provide structure for people with dementia. Faith leaders or volunteers can often visit people at home and support them to take part in acts of worship, such as prayer or reading from a holy book
- Be aware that the person with dementia may not be able to follow faith-based routines and rituals as they used to. Avoid correcting 'errors' – focus on meaning, not accuracy



The later stages of dementia

- In the later stages of dementia, listening to scripture, prayer or devotional songs could provide familiarity and comfort
- Sometimes, the most powerful support is simply being present – sitting together, praying, holding the person's hand or sharing quiet moments
- Many faiths have customs around the end of life, so if the person is moving into the final stages of dementia, consider whether they can be visited by a religious leader or volunteer who can support these rituals
- You could also speak to the person's healthcare professionals and other people who support them about their religious and spiritual beliefs, and document these in their advance care plan



Making difficult decisions as a carer

If you are a person of faith and supporting someone with dementia, you may find yourself in situations where you feel morally and spiritually conflicted. For example:

- Some people with dementia may experience false beliefs – such as thinking a parent or partner who has died is still alive – and correcting them may make them distressed. Often, it is better to ‘go along with’ what they are saying or use distraction techniques, but this may feel uncomfortable if honesty is a core value of your religion
- The person you care for may no longer remember that they follow a religious diet, but catering for their changes in taste might feel contradictory to your beliefs
- Your religion may give you a strong sense of duty to care for your loved one, but looking after them might be becoming unmanageable to the point that you are considering carers
- A person with dementia may not want or be able to engage with their faith at all

These situations can feel very difficult, but you are in a position that you did not expect to find yourself in. Sometimes, the kindest thing for the person with dementia and yourself might mean being more flexible with your beliefs.

If you are struggling with moral and ethical issues around your caring role, please speak to your faith leader or our Admiral Nurses. We are here to listen and offer guidance – please see p10 to find out how we can support you.

Making your faith community dementia-inclusive

Being part of a faith group can provide opportunities for reminiscence, connection and support, as well as helping people with dementia keep practising their religion. Here are some tips for faith leaders, employees and volunteers on making your community more inclusive for people with dementia.

Your place of worship

- Consider the accessibility of the building for people with dementia and how you could make improvements, for example with disabled parking, clear signage, good lighting and wheelchair access
- When the person with dementia arrives, make sure they are greeted by someone familiar
- Orientate them to the space, reminding them of the worship area, toilets, social area etc
- Think about comfort. Is the place of worship warm enough? Is the seating comfortable?
- Provide a quiet space where people with dementia can take a break
- Look into introducing dementia-inclusive services or meetings





Communication and connection

- With the consent of the person with dementia and/or their carer, consider telling other members of the group about their diagnosis and sharing advice on how to support them
- Prepare some topics of conversation to engage the person, for example memories of religious celebrations, favourite scripture readings etc
- Consider whether members of your faith group could act as befrienders, supporting people with dementia to attend worship or visit them at home

Reaching out to your community

- Think about other activities that your faith group could provide for people affected by dementia, such as lunch clubs or outreach in care homes
- Find out if group members need help with transport to attend worship and other events within the community
- If a person with dementia moves into a care home, talk to their family about how you can support them in their faith, for example with visits



“When I was diagnosed with dementia, I told only the minister and a few others at my local church. I couldn’t help but feel like I was being forced out, and that I was no longer of value.

“It was only when I joined my current church community that I truly felt safe and welcomed.

When I told them about my diagnosis; they were hugely supportive and told me that they look out for one another.

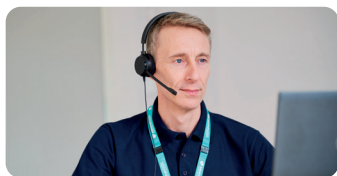
“I cannot put into words how important inclusive faith-based spaces are. They say a church is just a building, but it means so much more to me than that.”

Ronnie, who lives with young onset dementia

Support from Dementia UK

We're here to support you with any aspect of dementia. If you or anyone you know needs advice and guidance, please get in touch.

Contact our Helpline



To speak to an Admiral Nurse on our free national Helpline, call 0800 888 6678 (Monday-Friday 9am-9pm; Saturday, Sunday and bank holidays 9am-5pm; every day except 25th December) or email [▶ helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

Book a virtual clinic appointment



If you prefer, you can book a free 45-minute phone or video appointment with an Admiral Nurse at a time to suit you.

Visit [▶ dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

Sign up to our 'Dementia: what next?' online sessions



Our free 'Dementia: what next?' sessions are designed to help you learn more about living with dementia.

Visit [▶ dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next](https://dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next)

Read and order our information resources



You will find lots of information about dementia, including advice leaflets to read, download or order, at [▶ dementiauk.org](https://dementiauk.org). Some of our resources are available in other languages.

How your community can help

Faith groups of all denominations fundraise for Dementia UK, helping us support families in their own community and beyond.

If you are interested in organising a collection or fundraising event, we're here to help. Visit [▶ dementiauk.org/faith](https://dementiauk.org/faith) to request your free fundraising guide or call 020 8036 5400 to speak to a member of our Fundraising Team.

The difference you could make



£100

could pay for four carers to receive an hour of one-to-one support on Dementia UK's free Helpline.



£250

could fund an Admiral Nurse to run a full day of face-to-face appointments to help family carers understand how to support a loved one.



£520

could fund an Admiral Nurse to work on Dementia UK's Helpline all weekend, when other health services are closed.



£1,250

could fund an Admiral Nurse to support families in their local community for a whole week.



“Mum was a big part of the community where she lived for over 50 years. When she developed dementia, I found myself calling the Helpline in moments of crisis. It was so great to speak to a dementia specialist; the Admiral Nurse is immediately with you in that situation.”

Penny, whose mum lives with dementia



If you would like to know more about how your faith group can fundraise for Dementia UK, please scan the QR code, visit

➡ dementiauk.org/faith

or email ➡ faith@dementiauk.org



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