Things to try when someone with dementia stops recognising you
Caring for someone with dementia
Dementia and recognition

As their dementia progresses, some people with a diagnosis will stop recognising people they know, even close family members. This can be upsetting for families. Attempts to remind the person who the people in front of them are can be confusing and frustrating for them.

But it is still important to keep these connections with the person with dementia, and to include and involve them wherever possible. Familiarity and support from the people who know them best will help them feel safe and comfortable; and occasional moments of recognition can make it all worthwhile.

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.

For some people with dementia, the gradual loss of recent memories means the person may still remember you, but expect to see a younger person in front of them.

In others, the part of the brain that is responsible for recognising faces can become damaged. This is referred to as ‘proposagnosia’. If the person diagnosed with dementia is failing to recognise you or others for the first time, or seems distressed in your company, it is worth checking that there isn’t another reason for this, such as infection, medication changes, constipation etc. Some symptoms associated with dementia can be caused by other health problems, so always visit your GP if you are unsure.
Methods for prompting a person’s memory

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 revert back in their mind to previous marriages or relationships.

There are cues you can use to help the person with dementia make the connections between the past and the present.

The following tips may help to do this:

• Put up photos around the house of important times you were together, such as weddings, birthdays, children’s parties

• Show the progression of time in these photos, so that they show a spouse or partner when young, but also throughout time and how they are now
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- Keep a photo album on display with the photos clearly marked with people’s names, the year and the event, following the progression from the past to the present day
- Wear clothes around the house that the person would associate with you; these could include a favourite item of clothing or styles from when you were both younger
- Wear aftershave or perfume that the person associates with you. If they have a favourite perfume or aftershave, encourage its use; often the sense of smell can evoke positive memories when words cannot

Finding other ways to reconnect

It can be very difficult when someone with dementia stops recognising you. But there are things you can do to keep your connection with the person, and your relationship with them, warm and open.

If you can, try ‘entering into their world’, and asking the person diagnosed with dementia about the memories they mention. Encouraging them to talk about what feels familiar will help them to be at ease. Try not to remind the person with dementia of more recent realities that they are having trouble grasping, such as the death of their parents, as this can cause distress and confusion. Instead talk about happy memories and events that were important to them.

Taking part in activities together can be a good way to reconnect with a person with dementia. Anything you both enjoy can help you feel closer, such as:
- Playing some familiar music
- Watching a favourite film
- Drawing pictures
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• Going for a walk and talking about the things you see on the way
• Flower arranging
• Doing a jigsaw puzzle, if possible

Methods for communicating with someone with dementia

• 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
• If the person is struggling to recognise you, introduce yourself and tell them about the connection between you, for instance: “Hello mum, it’s Julie and I have little Danny, your grandson, with me.”
• Be reassuring; look the person in the eye and smile
• If a person with dementia is getting agitated, take yourself to 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.”

• Try not to correct the person if they get your name wrong or say something that isn’t true; this can lead to distress and frustration on all sides. Try to imagine how the person with dementia is feeling

Remember, not being recognised does not mean you are totally forgotten.

Sources of support

If you have any questions or worries about dementia, you can call the Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline on 0800 888 6678.

The Helpline is open 9am – 9pm Monday to Friday and 9am – 5pm at weekends.

For advice on using Life Story Work to help communicate and connect with a person with dementia, visit www.dementiauk.org/lifestory
Admiral Nurses help families to find those cues or methods personal to them which might help them reconnect with the person with dementia.
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.

Call 0800 888 6678 or email helpline@dementiauk.org
Open Monday – Friday, 9am – 9pm
Saturday and Sunday, 9am – 5pm

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