



Helping people with dementia in the COVID-19 environment

Even under normal circumstances, living with dementia is confusing, disorienting and often distressing for the person and their family. The issues associated with dementia can be worsened when environmental factors impact – especially something as extreme as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The uncertainty and change brought about by COVID-19 is unsettling for most people, but can be especially so for someone with dementia. The situation may create significant changes to their routine and everyday life. In addition, for those living outside of the home, it may be upsetting to not be able to visit with family and friends.

The person with dementia may:

- experience frequent confusion due to unreliable memory, disorientation or disorganised thinking
- find change difficult due to increasingly concrete and inflexible thinking
- misunderstand others' intentions or words due to language processing problems or difficulty with abstract concepts and inferences
- experience frustration if speech and language skills make expressing themselves a challenge
- be more prone to mistakes due to changes in their thinking ability, poor insight or a tendency to rush without thinking
- behavioural or emotional reactions may be more extreme.

You may notice in the individual with dementia changes such as:

- increased behavioural issues
- mood disturbance or irritability
- increased levels of stress/anxiety
- more prominent confusion.

To help to minimise these difficulties

Limit exposure to news coverage and social media

There is a lot of coverage of the virus and its effects on people. While this can help us understand the situation, it can also cause increased anxiety and worry – especially if people are not able to process all of the information they are reading.

Strategies

If the person is accessing the news and social media on their own devices, try to limit these if it is possible. For example, you may want to choose a news source to follow – or set time limits on social-media usage.

- Turn off the television to avoid news bulletins.
- Consider limiting newspaper deliveries if these are causing stress.
- Try not to talk about the situation too much or to convey your own anxiety.

Keep to the same routine (where possible)

For people who are now confined to the house, especially where they may have been working/volunteering or attending groups, the change in routine can be disturbing. The lack of activity may contribute to sleep difficulties or lowered mood. If you had a routine at home, try to follow this where possible.

Strategies

- Stick to the same structure for your day.
- Create a visual timetable to reassure the person about what is happening and when. For example, have laminated A4 sheets for each of activities for the day. At the start of the day write on them or add a picture of the activity that is scheduled for each block of time. Put these on a wall where the person can see them. Remove each one as the activity has been completed.
- Engage in activities that are meaningful and enjoyable.
- Try to maintain a healthy diet.

Check in with a doctor and/or specialist

If there are sudden or severe changes in the person's behaviour or mood, it would be worth seeking medical advice early. Even a small change in sleeping habits can be worth seeking advice from the person's GP or specialist.

Strategies

- Make sure you have prescriptions and a supply of medication if needed.
- Check with the GP whether they are offering videoconferencing or telephone consultations.

Keep in touch with family and friends

Being isolated in the home – or care facility – can be strange and unnerving. People may feel lonely or depressed. This might be especially true for people with dementia who may not be able to understand why they cannot visit family and friends. Try to encourage virtual visits using technology – or organise a roster of carers to check in on the person if they are living at home.

Strategies

- Encourage the person to use email, or text to send short messages.
- Use platforms like FaceTime, Zoom, Skype or WhatsApp to organise videoconferencing with friends and family.
- If the person was used to a regular social catch up, try to organise this virtually by using a platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams.
- If technology is confusing or difficult – make phone calls instead and ask friends and family to write letters and send photos to help the person to feel engaged. You can read these and reply to them together.
- Place photos around the room of friends and family.

Try virtual experiences and virtual activities

Many organisations have developed virtual-learning environments and activities in the wake of COVID-19. From virtual dance classes in your living room, to fitness apps and live theatre performances, the list is endless. Pick key areas, or things which your loved one was interested in, and help them set up these classes or activities via the television or tablet/laptop. This may help to replace the loss of classes or recreational activities.

Some free examples

Musical theatre and live music

- The Shows Must Go On – free full-length musical theatre productions by Andrew Lloyd Webber on YouTube.
- The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra – free concerts available via their YouTube channel.

Theatre and comedy

- The National Theatre in the UK is showing free full-length productions on their YouTube channel.
- The Comedy Festival in Melbourne might be cancelled but the show goes on: bit.ly/2VvOW1E.
- The Australian Ballet is streaming performances each week.
- The Melbourne Symphony orchestra is also streaming.

Fitness and sports

- Many fitness apps are being made freely available for mobile devices.
- YouTube features many fitness programs and workouts, from HIIT training to yoga.
- Check with your local trainer or group fitness program whether they are running virtual classes.

Cultural activities

- Tour the world's best museums and galleries for free while they are closed. A shortlist of such attractions includes the Melbourne Museum, the Louvre, Vatican museum, Guggenheim and the British Museum.
- Nature – bring nature into the home via the Melbourne and other international zoos live streaming and there are nature sites that live-stream animal activities in the wild too.

Distraction and action to manage distress

When people with dementia become worried or distressed, because their thinking is often not very flexible anymore, it can be hard to shift them. So it is important to try to take a prevention approach. Ensuring that there are many activities at the ready to keep the person occupied can reduce opportunities for distress.

Strategies

- Have a list of activities for each day that the person enjoys and remains capable of (colouring, cards, tending to indoor plants, drawing). Well-learned, familiar and routine tasks tend to be remembered and more likely to remain possible compared to new activities.
- A set of soothing or distracting activities to redirect the person's thoughts while also calming them could include: a stress ball, calming music, a favourite game, a phone call, a quiet space where they can relax and feel comfortable.
- Including a relaxation strategy in their daily routine can be helpful – e.g., relaxation breathing, visualisation, progressive muscle relaxation, massage.
- Keep their minds agile and active through activities (within their range of capability) such as crosswords, word games, Sudoku, composing a letter (orally if they can't write), watching and then discussing a movie.

Orient and clarify

Confusion and/or disorientation may increase with changes and associated worry. The strategies above can help. Other more specific ideas include:

- a clear, written laminated sign stating where the person is, and the date
- large digital clock visible with the time
- pictures of friends and family members in a visible location
- way to access and play old, familiar music that they enjoy.

It is also important:

- to label rooms and objects if required
- if they keep asking why things are different (e.g., why isn't a family member visiting): leave on a wall a clear note explaining in one simple (non-distressing) sentence.

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak. Visit psychology.org.au for more.

For carers

Many carers will also be feeling isolated and under extra pressure during this time.

- It will be critical that they find time in each day to engage in some relaxation strategies and down time, even if the time is only brief.
- If someone is able to share the caring load, ensure that you do this in a balanced way.
- If there is not an additional support person available, ensure that you stay connected with your own friends and family via FaceTime and phone calls.
- Reach out to support groups and carer resources such as Dementia Australia: www.dementia.org.au; National dementia helpline: 1800 100 500

Seeking help

If you or the person with dementia feel you need more than general support, a psychologist with training in working with neurocognitive difficulties, such as a neuropsychologist, can help. Contacting your GP is a good starting point to access a psychologist. Or you can:

- Use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist service. To access the service go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- Ask your GP or another health professional to refer you

Acknowledgments




This resource was prepared by the:



A clinical neuropsychologist is a psychologist who is trained to understand brain-behaviour relationships (across the lifespan):

- To assess thinking/brain abilities and difficulties to clarify diagnosis and identify the client's care needs and priorities**
- To provide targeted intervention or rehabilitation for people with thinking/brain-related difficulties or disorders**
- To adapt or modify treatments to take into account the effects of thinking/brain difficulties**

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