

Visiting people with dementia

Suggestions for Christian visitors



What is dementia?

Dementia is a condition in which the cells of the brain die more quickly than in normal ageing.

This leads to a general decline in a person's abilities. Individuals may be forgetful, especially of recent events, and they may be muddled about time or place and have difficulty carrying out familiar tasks.

Their behaviour may be unusual or challenging.

Dementia is a complex and perplexing disease whose causes are not yet understood. There are two main types. In Alzheimer's disease, changes take place in the brain leading to the death of cells and a gradual and slow decline. In multi-infarct dementia, mini-strokes occur which destroy small areas of cells and here the illness progresses in a step-like manner.

Why visit people with dementia?

People with dementia and their carers often receive few visitors because there is a mistaken belief that visiting is not worthwhile – and because visitors don't know what to say or do.

However, communicating with others is a basic human need and visiting provides opportunities for nourishing love and relationships and showing that the person and their family and friends are not forgotten.

People with dementia are unable to cope with the usual style of visit. Rather than listening, the visitor needs to take the initiative. The challenge is to communicate in ways appropriate to the person's diminishing abilities; this may involve periods of silence and just being there with them.

Some practical suggestions

PRAY FOR THE PERSON, their family and friends and for yourself before you visit.

WEAR OR TAKE SOMETHING which may remind the person who you are, for example a clerical collar, name badge or cross.

APPROACH FROM WHERE THEY CAN SEE YOU and make sure they are aware of your presence.

TRY TO BE ON THE SAME LEVEL and to make eye contact as this will help to focus their attention. Remember many people respond to a smile.

INTRODUCE YOURSELF CLEARLY, explaining who you are and your connection with them. For example, 'I am Alison. I come from St John's Church'.

TAKE SOMETHING WITH YOU to cue long-term memory. For example flowers or music (smells and sounds are powerful cues) or a photograph album.

COMMUNICATION IS: a friendly approach

USE SIMPLE SENTENCES, speaking slowly and clearly but not in a patronising manner. Make only one comment at a time and be positive.

BE AWARE that the person may also be visually impaired or have hearing difficulties. Don't always blame the dementia for lack of understanding.

AVOID ASKING QUESTIONS, except those that encourage the expression of feelings or only expect a 'yes' or 'no' or a gesture. Give time for the person to respond to what you are saying.

DON'T IGNORE FEELINGS. Respond to expressions of happiness, sadness, anger or indifference rather than trying to make sense of their words. Be tolerant of unusual behaviour.

More practical suggestions

READ, where appropriate, familiar passages from the Bible, which will often evoke a response – for example Psalm 23, the Beatitudes or a story.

PRAY using the Lord's Prayer or short sentences and, where this is welcomed, gently hold the person's hands.

TAKE with you a cross which can be held. This often helps the person to centre on God.

IF THE PERSON has been used to receiving Holy Communion, ask someone who knows them well to take a reserved sacrament (if this is the practice of your church) or conduct a simple service. Don't hurry or worry about seemingly irrelevant interruptions.

ACCEPT that your visit may well be short as concentration will often be poor.

INDICATE that you will return and keep your promise. Where appropriate touch, embrace or kiss as you leave.

IF POSSIBLE KEEP IN TOUCH with the family as they may not know that you visit their relative, since the person will probably forget within five minutes that you have been.

REMEMBER that although you and your visit are quickly forgotten, the feelings generated will remain. People with dementia continue to respond emotionally, even when they can no longer reason.

COMMUNICATION IS: a gentle touch

Methodist Homes (MHA) is a charity providing care, accommodation and support for older people throughout Britain. We are one of the most well respected care providers in the sector and amongst the largest charities in Britain, providing services to older people for over 70 years. Our mission is to improve the quality of life for older people, inspired by Christian concern and our services have always been open to all faiths and none.

Christians on Ageing (CCOA) is the main national fully ecumenical organisation that focuses on the spiritual needs and development of older people. For more information visit www.ccoa.co.uk

There is, as yet, no cure for dementia, but until there is we are doing everything we can to provide the best possible care for people with this condition. To order or download the companion leaflets *Worship and people with dementia*, *Spiritual Care and people with dementia* and *Growing Dementia-Friendly Churches* visit www.mha.org.uk or call Freephone **0800 0856962** or write to **MHA Freepost 499 Derby DE1 9BR**. Suggested donation is 50p/ea or £2 /set.

Revd Malcolm Goldsmith's book 'In A Strange Land... People with Dementia and the Local Church' (4M 2004) also includes helpful information.

The Aspects of Ageing Papers aim to deepen our understanding of meeting people's spiritual needs through sharing the insights from Chaplaincy to Older People with developments in Pastoral Theology. If you have comments on this paper, or indeed a wish to submit your own work for consideration, please email me at keith.albans@mha.org.uk. Papers submitted should be a maximum of 2,500 words.

Rev. Dr. Keith Albans - Director of Chaplaincy & Spirituality

By Revd Dr Margaret Goodall, based on material produced by the late Revd Eileen Shamy from New Zealand. Her book 'A Guide to the Spiritual Dimension of Care for People with Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia – More than Body, Brain and Breath', (Jessica Kingsley 2003).

