

Visiting Someone with Memory Loss



Memory loss that slowly erodes a person's ability to safely care for oneself is called dementia. Although many older adults develop some form of dementia, it is not a normal expectation of aging. Profound forgetfulness is usually due to a brain disorder.



Dementia causes the brain to deteriorate over time. As the body's "computer," the brain controls functions such as memory, language, judgment and thinking. Dementia also affects muscles that control walking, eating, drinking and going to the bathroom.

There are dozens of forms of dementia, and the most common one is Alzheimer's disease. Unfortunately, there is no cure and current drug treatments are modestly effective. Scientists are investigating causes of dementia as well as better treatments and means of prevention.

People with dementia gradually lose their memories and communication skills. However, you can learn how to adapt to these changes and enjoy meaningful interactions. Our loved ones with dementia also have lessons to teach us. Every day is a gift. We are more than our thinking abilities. We all need love, friendship and acceptance. We can find joy in each moment.

Use this guide to better understand how to enhance visits with people with dementia.

Rainbow Hospice and Palliative Care gratefully acknowledges the following organizations for supporting the Dementia with Dignity program:

- Dr. Scholl Foundation
 - Grant Healthcare Foundation
 - Michael Reese Health Trust
 - The Retirement Research Foundation
 - The Rotary Club of Palatine
- and other generous supporters.*

Stages of Dementia

Regardless of the type, dementia can be divided into four stages: Early, Middle, Late and Final. These stages are useful in understanding how to communicate effectively with people living with dementia.

Early Stage

People with dementia may remember your face and name but may not always recall your personal connection. They are unable to recall recent events. They may repeat themselves. They may have difficulty finding words and keeping track of a conversation. They may lack awareness about their thinking and memory problems.

- Sit at eye level and introduce yourself in a friendly, matter-of-fact way.
- Shake hands or use gentle touch.
- Remind them about how you know each other.
- Use a soft yet audible tone of voice.
- Allow extra time for the person to answer.
- Ask one question at a time – questions with yes-no answers work best.
- Avoid asking questions about recent events.
- Ask about events from the distant past.
- Respond as if a question or story was being told for the first time.
- Remain patient when the same questions and stories are repeated.

Early Stage ideas for activities during your visit:

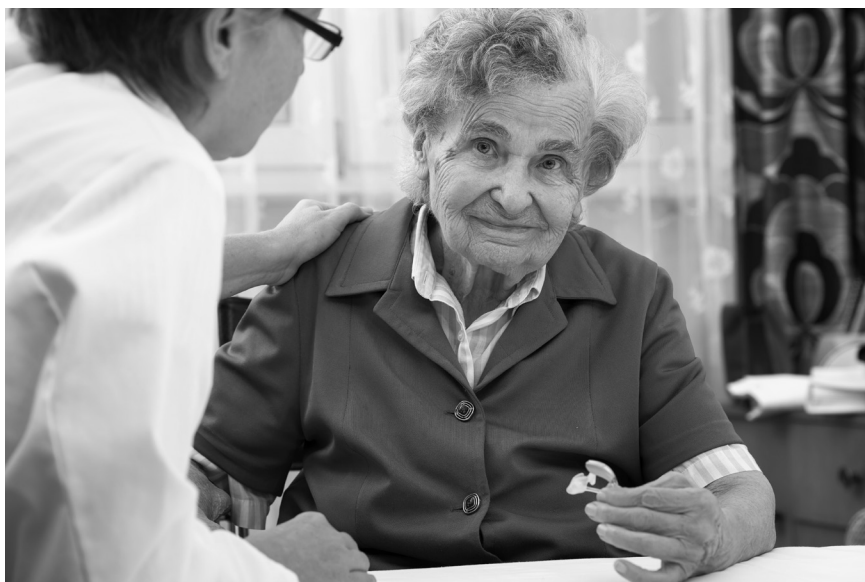
- Look at old photos or movies together.
- Reminisce about past events.
- Ask about one's family history.
- Build a scrapbook with stories and photos.
- Write down one's life story to share with others.
- Take a walk or exercise together.
- Share a meal or dessert.
- Listen to favorite music.
- Play simple table games or put together puzzles.
- Tell staff about the person's interests and choices.



Middle Stage

People with dementia have increased problems expressing and understanding words. Short-term and long-term memories may be confusing. A loved one may not always remember who you are, but will enjoy knowing that a friendly person is visiting. Respect their usual routine and environment instead of making changes.

- Say hello and your name in calm, friendly voice.
- State your relationship to see if it registers.
- Don't worry if the person does not recognize you.
- Be a friend and enter the person's reality.
- Use your tone of voice and body language to establish a friendly connection.
- Go with the flow — do not argue or correct facts.
- Limit background noise — turn off TV or music.
- Find a quiet space to talk or do things together.
- Ask about past and present preferences - hobbies, sports, foods, pets, career, family and friends.
- One-to-one visits are better than group visits.
- Limit your visit to one hour.
- Report any concerns to staff members.



Middle Stage ideas for activities during your visit:

- Draw or paint pictures together.
- Sing or dance.
- Talk about the seasons and holiday traditions.
- Tap into interests associated with one's past work. For example, for someone with a business background — organize papers or stuff envelopes; for a homemaker — fold towels, sort socks, or dust furniture.
- Play simpler table games and use simpler puzzles.
- Sort or match cards.
- Listen to favorite music together.
- Pray together, sing hymns or do other religious activities.

Late Stage

People with dementia have severe problems with language — using and comprehending words. Short-term memories are absent and long-term memories are confused. They often “time travel” to the past and perceive themselves as much younger people. Even long-term memories may be lost and so they may dwell simply in the moment. They may not recognize familiar people or objects. They need help with basic tasks such as toileting, bathing, walking and eating. Leaving one’s usual care setting can create undue anxiety, so stick close to home.

- Limit your visit time to 20-40 minutes.
- Make eye contact at eye level.
- Keep sentences short and use simple words.
- Watch for signs of fatigue, restlessness and discomfort.
- Be aware that pain may manifest as anger, tears or agitation.
- Keep in mind that all behavior has meaning, so look for root causes of distress.
- Report any concerns to staff members.

Late Stage ideas for activities during your visit:

- Use gentle touch.
- Pretend to be whomever and wherever he or she wishes you to be.
- Offer a stuffed animal or baby doll.
- Offer favorite foods or snacks.
- Sing or listen to familiar music.
- Hold hands, offer hugs and smiles.
- Use religious symbols that connect with one's faith tradition – sing a hymn, say a familiar prayer, place a cross or rosary in the person's hand.





Final Stage

Although there is no apparent link to any memories or language, the present moment means everything. One's emotions and senses are still preserved. The human spirit is still alive until the end of life. It is still important to visit. He or she may not remember that you have visited, but research shows that pleasant feelings may last for hours. Personal comfort is the goal.

- Limit your visit time to 20 minutes.
- Use few words and a comforting tone of voice.
- Try to connect through the five senses: touch, smell, hearing, taste and sight.
- A bag with things that can trigger the senses may be available, so ask staff members for ideas.
- Report any concerns to staff members.

Final Stage ideas for activities during your visit:

- Provide frequent hand massages with lotion.
- Assist with mouth care.
- Offer tastings of honey or other sweets.
- Offer a stuffed animal or baby doll.
- Sing or listen to familiar music.
- Hold hands, offer hugs and smiles.
- Use religious symbols that connect with one's faith tradition – sing a hymn, say a familiar prayer, place a cross or rosary in the person's hand.
- The end of life may be near – express what this person has meant to you.

Visiting Someone with Memory Loss is published by Rainbow Hospice and Palliative Care as part of our *Dementia with Dignity* program. We provide highly skilled professionals in many disciplines as well as experienced volunteers who are specially trained in caring for individuals and families affected by dementia.

Rainbow Hospice and Palliative Care empowers our community to live with hope and resilience throughout the journey with illness and loss.

Rainbow Hospice and Palliative Care

*Serving twelve counties in Illinois with
main offices at*

1550 Bishop Court
Mount Prospect, IL 60056

847-685-9900

www.RainbowHospice.org/Dementia

