

Steps to help you have a good visit with your loved one

Visiting a loved one living with Alzheimer's disease or other age-related dementia can be challenging. The following 11 suggestions will help make the visit a positive experience for your loved one and you.

- 1. Timing is everything.** If your loved one often gets anxious or doesn't want you to leave, try to plan your visits around mealtimes or special events. By doing this, the care partners will be able to help redirect your loved one with something that is meaningful or fun.
- 2. Be mindful of your nonverbal communication.** Communication is both verbal and nonverbal, and individuals with dementia are especially intuitive to nonverbal communication. Conveying good vibes is particularly important to get the visit off on the right foot. One of the first things to do is always approach your loved one from the front and establish eye contact. Smile and have positive and welcoming body language. It is also important to stand, sit down, or kneel, so that you are on the same level. Try not to hover, as this can be perceived as threatening. Most people with dementia usually welcome physical contact such as hugs, handshakes, a warm hand on the arm or back, and gentle hand/shoulder massages.
- 3. Pay attention to the words you use.** Because people living with dementia have difficulty remembering things, avoid saying, "Remember?" or "I just told you ...". Words and phrases like these can be upsetting and only cause frustration. When people repeat themselves, respond as if it's the first time you are hearing the question.
- 4. Consider using a different approach when you talk.** Your loved one's ability to communicate verbally diminishes as the disease progresses. Since people with dementia usually can focus on only one idea at a time, you will need to slow down and simplify the conversation. Speaking in short sentences with only one idea to each sentence allows your loved one a chance to process what you are saying. Refrain from talking with people living with dementia as though they are children. Respect them for the adults they are and the roles they have had in life. Simplify the conversation and ask them to make easy decisions such as, "Do you want to wear the blue sweater or the red sweater today?" If your loved one was a physician, it may be important to use the term, "Dr. _____" instead of "Mom" or "Dad." There are times when your loved one will be angry with you for an unknown reason. Be prepared to say you are sorry, even if you didn't do anything wrong. Validating the reaction and simply saying, "I am sorry" is vitally important, because it sends the message that you recognize your loved one's emotions.
- 5. Remember to avoid arguing.** Even though your loved one has been diagnosed with a form of dementia, he or she still has the right to say, "No!" If you try to argue with your loved one, both of you will only get more frustrated. We don't force people with dementia to do something that they don't want to do. If they don't want to get dressed, shower, take their medications, or brush their teeth, we don't force them. Instead, we try a different approach or take a break and try again later. If they refuse, we try something different or ask a care partner to try the task. (Professional care partners have learned not to argue or force issues. This means that sometimes when you come to visit, your loved one may not have shaved or may be wearing the same clothes as the day before. This can be frustrating for you, but trust the care partners to get the task done when your loved one will accept the help).

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6. **Offer a simple, plausible explanation.** If your loved one says he or she wants to go home, it can sometimes be helpful to attribute to someone else the necessity for staying at Touchmark. For example, you could say, “Your doctor says this is the best place for you to be now.” This will allow your loved one to focus on someone who is not seen frequently.
7. **Listen.** Just as rationalizing doesn’t help, neither does trying to convince your loved one not to feel a certain way. Instead, acknowledge what you observe. “I see that you are angry (lonely/upset/sad/etc.).” This lets your loved one know he or she was heard and isn’t alone. Encourage your loved one to talk including letting you know how frustrating it is to lose one’s memories. Just don’t take things to heart when your loved one’s emotions are running high. It’s likely he or she will forget what was said by the time you visit next.
8. **Reminisce about the “good old days.”** Dementia will affect your loved one’s short-term memory first, so reminiscing about the days when you were growing up or the early years of marriage will have a greater likelihood of triggering memories.
9. **Be active and engaged with your loved one.** Bringing old pictures, an iPad with games, CDs of music your loved one likes, life-story objects, or previous hobbies are all ways to enjoy your visits. Another meaningful option is to share recorded messages from other children and grandchildren. Incorporate exercise into your visit; going for a walk is good for you and your loved one. If the community where your loved one lives is having an activity, attend with your loved one. You can also bring in a treat to eat or drink with your loved one.
10. **Continue to keep visiting.** You may ask yourself, “Why should I visit if my loved one doesn’t remember me or realize that I was even there?” Even though those living with dementia may not recognize loved ones, they do enjoy visiting with people. Shorter visits are often best, especially if your loved one is sensitive to stimulation. State your name when you come to visit (“Hi mom. It’s your daughter, Susie.”). If you are bringing others with you, such as grandchildren or friends, state their names, as well. This will take the pressure off your loved one needing to remember your name. Many times, your loved one will recognize faces but won’t be able to recall names. By saying names, you are taking the visit in the right direction.
11. **Remember, it is the disease.** Your loved one will change in many ways. Try not to get upset by new behaviors. These changes occur because the brain is failing, and the changes are part of the disease process. Adapting to the changes will help make visits easier for you and your loved one.

As certified Best Friends™ environments, Touchmark’s memory care services provide person-centered care for those living with dementia as well as support for their families. A key aspect of personalized care is knowing each resident’s preferences. For example, some people like their coffee black; others prefer cream and sugar; some drink tea instead of coffee. As you discover new likings for your loved one, please be sure to let us know.

Remember, our caring, understanding staff are available to listen, answer questions, and offer encouragement. We also provide ongoing support groups for families coping with the daily physical, mental, and emotional challenges that occur when someone you love has Alzheimer’s disease or other age-related dementia. Additional information is available at Touchmark.com.



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