

What not to say to somebody with dementia



For somebody living with dementia, language and communication can become more difficult over time.

How and when language problems develop will depend on the individual, as well as the type of dementia and the stage it is at. While the person living with the condition may have issues with recall or finding the right word, the words that other people use are important too. A poor choice of language can be both hurtful and frustrating.

Good communication can be key to helping somebody to live well with dementia. Here are a few of the words and questions to avoid in conversation.

7 things not to say to somebody with dementia

1. 'Remember when...?'

While it can be tempting to try and jog the memory of somebody living with dementia, this kind of question is often a reminder of memories lost. This can be a frustrating or painful experience, and there's also no evidence that training the brain in this way will help somebody hold on to memories. That's not to say you should avoid talking about the past, but it's better to lead the conversation and allow the person to join in.

Try this instead:

Instead of posing a question, try leading with 'I remember when...' instead. That way the person can search their memory calmly without feeling embarrassed, then join in if they like.

2. ‘I’ve just told you that’

Having to answer the same question several times can be frustrating, but repetition will happen. There is little benefit to passing on your frustration to somebody with dementia, and saying ‘I’ve just told you that’ only reminds the person of their condition.

Try this instead:

Try to be polite and as patient as possible. It’s important for somebody with dementia to feel they’re being listened to and understood.

3. ‘Your brother died 10 years ago’

A person living with dementia may forget about a past bereavement or ask for somebody who has passed away. But reminding them of a loved one’s death can be painful, even causing them to relive the grief they’ve already experienced. How carers should respond to this may vary for different circumstances, but it’s always good to show sensitivity.

Try this instead:

It may be better to come up with another reason for somebody’s absence, while at other times a gentle reminder is appropriate. In the later stages of dementia, trying to remind them that the person has died is unlikely to work and may be best avoided.

4. ‘What did you do this morning?’

Avoid asking too many open-ended questions, as it could be stressful for a person with dementia if they can’t remember the answer. While it might seem polite to ask somebody about their day, it’s better to focus on what’s happening in the present. It’s also important that people with dementia continue to make personal choices, but defining the options might be a helpful technique.

Try this instead:

Rather than ‘what would you like to drink?’, you could ask ‘do you want tea or coffee?’ or more simply, ‘do you want a cup of tea?’.

5. ‘Do you recognise me?’

It can be distressing when somebody with dementia doesn’t recognise you, but remember that the feeling is mutual. Asking the person if they know who you are can make them feel guilty if they don’t remember, or offended if they do.

Try this instead:

The way you greet somebody with dementia might change depending on the stage of their condition – judge for yourself, but keep it friendly. A warm hello could suffice, or it may help to say your name.

6. ‘Let’s have a cup of tea now, then after that we can go for nice walk and get lunch in that café you like in town.’

Long, complex sentences can be difficult to grasp for somebody with dementia. It's difficult to process several ideas at once as cognitive abilities slow down, so it's better to give directions or instructions one step at a time.

Try this instead:

Use short, simple sentences as much as possible. Avoid speaking in loud environments and wait until you have the person's full attention before you start a conversation.

7. 'Do you need some help with that, love?'

Words like 'love', 'honey' and 'dear' can be patronising for people living with dementia. This is sometimes referred to as 'elderspeak' and can cause older people to feel infantilised.

Try this instead:

Always remember the person behind the dementia, using their name as often as appropriate. This helps keep their dignity intact and aids concentration too.

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For more advice on communicating with somebody living with dementia, visit the [Communicating and Language section](#) of our website.