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FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Dementia Awareness in Care Settings

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 066

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Introduction

Dementia is a term used to describe a group of symptoms caused by conditions that affect the brain. These symptoms may include difficulties with **memory, thinking, communication, understanding, judgement and carrying out everyday activities**.

There are several different types of dementia, including **Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies and frontotemporal dementia**. People may also experience more than one type of dementia at the same time.

Dementia is progressive, meaning symptoms generally become more significant over time. However, the way dementia develops and affects daily life varies considerably from person to person.

Care staff should always remember that **the individual is a person first**. Their life history, personality, relationships, preferences, abilities and choices remain important regardless of their diagnosis.

Why This Resource Matters

Understanding dementia awareness helps care staff to:

- Understand what dementia is and how it may affect an individual.
- Recognise that dementia is not simply a normal part of ageing.
- Understand that different types of dementia can affect people differently.
- Communicate patiently, clearly and respectfully.
- Support independence and remaining abilities wherever possible.
- Recognise how surroundings and routines can influence wellbeing.
- Respond compassionately when an individual becomes distressed or anxious.
- Avoid unnecessarily correcting, confronting or arguing with someone.
- Understand that behaviour may communicate an unmet need.
- Recognise significant or sudden changes that require reporting.
- Promote dignity, choice and person-centred care.

How Dementia May Affect an Individual

Depending on the person and type of dementia, changes may affect:

- Short-term or longer-term memory.
- Communication and finding the right words.
- Concentration and decision-making.
- Recognition of people, places or objects.
- Awareness of time and surroundings.
- Planning and completing everyday tasks.
- Mobility and coordination.
- Mood and emotional wellbeing.
- Sleep patterns.
- Eating and drinking.
- Perception of the environment.
- Behaviour and responses to situations.

Care staff should **never assume that every difficulty an individual experiences is caused by dementia**.

Dementia and Delirium – An Important Difference

Dementia generally develops gradually, whereas **delirium usually involves a sudden change in a person's mental state** and may develop over hours or days.

An individual living with dementia can also develop delirium.

Possible causes of sudden confusion or deterioration can include infection, dehydration, constipation, pain, medication-related problems and other acute illnesses.

A sudden change in an individual's confusion, alertness, behaviour or ability should therefore **not simply be accepted as their dementia getting worse**.

It should be reported promptly and assessed according to the individual's care plan and organisational procedures.

Key Message

See the person, not just the dementia.

Good dementia care starts with understanding the individual — their history, preferences, abilities, routines and what matters to them.

When something changes suddenly, **observe, record and report rather than assuming it is part of dementia.**

Supporting a Person Living with Dementia

Good dementia care is **person-centred**. This means recognising that every individual has their own personality, history, preferences, routines, relationships and abilities.

Rather than focusing only on what a person can no longer do, care staff should identify and support the things they **can still do**, providing assistance only where it is needed.

Familiar routines, surroundings and people can provide reassurance and help individuals feel more secure.

Communicating Effectively

Dementia can make communication more difficult, but there are many ways care staff can help.

Good practice includes:

- Approach the individual calmly and respectfully.
- Introduce yourself where appropriate, even if you have met before.
- Gain the person's attention before speaking.
- Use clear, straightforward language.
- Speak at a comfortable pace and avoid rushing.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Allow plenty of time for the person to respond.
- Reduce unnecessary background noise and distractions.
- Pay attention to facial expressions, gestures and body language.
- Offer simple choices rather than overwhelming the person with options.
- Avoid unnecessarily correcting, contradicting or arguing with the individual.
- Check whether hearing aids, glasses or other communication aids are available and being used appropriately.
- Remain patient if information needs to be repeated.

Communication difficulties should never be mistaken for a lack of intelligence, feelings or understanding.

Understanding Behaviour as Communication

A person living with dementia may sometimes behave in ways that others find difficult to understand. They may become restless, withdrawn, anxious, frightened, agitated or repeatedly ask the same question.

Rather than simply describing behaviour as “challenging”, staff should consider whether the individual may be **communicating a need or experiencing distress**.

Possible contributing factors can include:

- Pain or discomfort.
- Hunger or thirst.
- Needing the toilet.
- Constipation.
- Tiredness.
- Infection or illness.
- Medication effects.
- Feeling frightened or confused.
- Being too hot or cold.
- Excessive noise or stimulation.
- Changes to familiar routines.
- Loneliness or boredom.
- Difficulty communicating what they need.

Understanding what happened **before, during and after** an episode may help identify patterns or possible triggers.

Supporting Independence

A diagnosis of dementia does not mean that an individual should automatically have everyday tasks done for them.

Care staff should:

- Encourage the person to participate in their own care.
- Break activities into manageable steps where helpful.
- Offer appropriate prompts rather than immediately taking over.
- Allow additional time to complete tasks.
- Maintain familiar routines where possible.
- Offer meaningful choices.
- Support safe mobility and activity.
- Recognise and build upon remaining strengths and abilities.
- Balance safety with the person's right to independence and choice.

Providing too much assistance can unintentionally reduce confidence and independence.

Supporting Orientation Without Causing Distress

Some people with dementia may become confused about time, place or events.

Helpful approaches can include using familiar objects, photographs, clocks, calendars, signs and consistent routines where these benefit the individual.

However, repeatedly correcting someone when it causes distress may not be helpful. Staff should respond sensitively to the person's feelings and individual needs rather than entering unnecessary arguments about what is factually correct.

Remember

Behaviour has meaning.

When a person living with dementia becomes distressed or behaves differently, consider what they may be trying to communicate.

Remain calm, look for possible causes, follow the individual's care plan and **report significant or sudden changes promptly**.

Professional Responsibilities

Care staff have an important role in helping people living with dementia feel **safe, respected, understood and involved in their own care**. Support should always be based on the individual's care plan, preferences, abilities and needs rather than assumptions about their diagnosis.

As a care professional, you should always:

- Treat the individual with dignity, patience and respect.
- Follow the person's individual care plan and agreed routines.
- Communicate calmly, clearly and at an appropriate pace.
- Allow sufficient time for the individual to process information and respond.
- Support choice and independence wherever possible.
- Avoid unnecessarily arguing, confronting or correcting the person.
- Consider whether distress or changes in behaviour may indicate an unmet need.
- Observe for pain, illness, dehydration, constipation or other possible causes of changes.
- Promote a familiar, reassuring and appropriately stimulating environment.
- Support prescribed medication only when trained, competent and authorised.
- Record relevant observations accurately and objectively.
- Report significant or sudden changes promptly.
- Follow safeguarding, mental capacity and organisational procedures where appropriate.

When to Raise Concerns

Report concerns promptly if the individual:

- Becomes suddenly more confused than usual.
- Develops a significant or sudden change in behaviour.
- Becomes unusually drowsy, withdrawn or difficult to engage.
- Develops new agitation, distress or restlessness without an obvious explanation.
- Shows signs of pain or discomfort.
- Has significantly reduced food or fluid intake.
- Develops changes in mobility or experiences repeated falls.
- Develops new continence problems or significant changes in toileting.
- Shows signs of possible infection or illness.
- Experiences new difficulties with eating, drinking or swallowing.
- Shows any other significant deterioration from their usual condition.

A sudden change should **not automatically be attributed to dementia**.

When to Seek Emergency Assistance

Some changes may indicate a medical emergency rather than progression of dementia.

Call 999 if the individual:

- Shows **FAST signs of a possible stroke**.
- Develops severe or sudden breathing difficulties.
- Has severe chest pain or symptoms suggesting a medical emergency.
- Experiences a seizure requiring emergency assistance.
- Collapses, loses consciousness or is difficult to wake.
- Develops sudden severe symptoms and appears critically unwell.
- Has sustained a serious injury.
- Has rapidly worsening symptoms and you believe their life may be at risk.

If a life-threatening emergency is suspected, **call 999 and follow organisational emergency procedures**.

Supporting a Person Who Is Distressed

If an individual living with dementia becomes frightened, anxious or distressed:

- Remain calm and use a reassuring tone.
- Approach in a non-threatening manner.
- Give the person appropriate personal space.
- Listen and acknowledge how they are feeling.
- Avoid arguing about their perception of events.
- Reduce unnecessary noise, activity or stimulation where appropriate.
- Consider whether they may be experiencing pain, hunger, thirst, tiredness or needing the toilet.
- Use familiar activities, objects, music or conversation where these are known to provide reassurance.
- Follow strategies documented within the person's care plan.
- Seek additional support if the situation cannot be safely managed.

The aim should be to understand and reduce the cause of distress, **not simply to stop the behaviour**.

Choice, Capacity and Dementia

A diagnosis of dementia does **not automatically mean that a person lacks mental capacity**.

Under the **Mental Capacity Act 2005**, capacity must be considered in relation to the **specific decision at the time it needs to be made**.

Care staff should support individuals to make their own decisions wherever possible by providing information in an accessible way and allowing appropriate time and support.

Where an individual lacks capacity for a particular decision, any decision made on their behalf must follow the Mental Capacity Act and be made in their **best interests**, using the least restrictive approach appropriate to the circumstances.

Good Practice Reminder

Do not define a person by their dementia.

Their personality, relationships, memories, preferences, abilities, culture, beliefs and life experiences remain central to who they are.

Good dementia care means **knowing the person, supporting what they can do, communicating with patience and recognising when something has changed.**

Summary

Dementia is a term used to describe a range of symptoms caused by conditions that affect the brain. It can affect memory, thinking, communication, understanding, behaviour and a person's ability to carry out everyday activities.

Every person's experience of dementia is different. High-quality dementia care should therefore be **person-centred**, recognising the individual's life history, preferences, relationships, abilities, routines and choices.

Care staff play an important role in promoting dignity and independence, communicating patiently, recognising behaviour as a possible form of communication and identifying significant changes in an individual's condition.

Importantly, a **sudden increase in confusion or change in behaviour should not automatically be assumed to be dementia progressing**. It may indicate delirium, infection, pain or another health problem requiring prompt assessment.

Dementia Awareness Checklist

✓ See the **person first**, not simply their diagnosis.

✓ Know the individual's life history, preferences, routines and usual abilities.

✓ Communicate calmly, clearly and respectfully.

✓ Allow sufficient time for the person to understand information and respond.

✓ Support independence and remaining abilities wherever possible.

✓ Offer meaningful choices without overwhelming the individual.

✓ Avoid unnecessary confrontation, correction or arguments.

✓ Consider whether changes in behaviour may communicate pain, discomfort, fear or another unmet need.

✓ Remember that a diagnosis of dementia does **not automatically mean a person lacks mental capacity**.

✓ Record observations accurately and objectively.

✓ Recognise sudden changes in confusion, alertness or behaviour as potentially significant.

✓ Report deterioration or concerns promptly according to the individual's care plan and organisational procedures.

✓ **Call 999 when a life-threatening medical emergency is suspected.**

Further Information

For further guidance on dementia, visit:

NHS – Dementia Guide
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dementia/

Alzheimer's Society – Dementia Information and Support
https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/

NICE – Dementia: Assessment, Management and Support
https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng97

SCIE – Dementia
https://www.scie.org.uk/dementia/

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Related Knowledge Hub Resources

- Resource 016 – Promoting Effective Communication in Care Settings
- Resource 017 – Person-Centred Care Awareness
- Resource 018 – Supporting Independence in Care Settings
- Resource 022 – Recognising and Responding to Pain in Care Settings
- Resource 034 – Recognising Deterioration in Care Settings
- Resource 042 – Mental Capacity Act (MCA)
- Resource 050 – Delirium Awareness

Related FlexiLearnHub Courses

- Person-Centred Care Awareness
- Mental Capacity Act & DoLS Awareness
- Safeguarding Adults Awareness

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