

# ASSISTING A RESIDENT LIVING WITH DEMENTIA WITH DRESSING, UNDRESSING AND CONTINENCE



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## Assisting a resident living with dementia with dressing, undressing and continence

The way we dress is a part of who we are. It is a very personal activity; one we are used to doing ourselves. Similar, is using the washroom. The bathroom is the ultimate place of privacy, a place where we are used to closing the door so that no one invades our space. There are many reasons why a person living with dementia may need support with dressing and continence, for example memory loss or physical difficulties.

This tip sheet offers some background on dementia and strategies to respect residents' routines and preferences and take advantage of dressing and grooming time to build authentic relationships.

### Dementia

People living with dementia may see the world differently because of sensory changes, having better access to memories from the past than the present, environmental factors or other factors. They may also misperceive things (e.g., mistake a shadow for a person) because they cannot see the object clearly. As the illness progresses, older memories are easier to retrieve than more recent memories.<sup>1</sup> This means people living with dementia may use past memories to help understand their current world. Because of this, care partners may not fully understand or interpret the person's words, actions or gestures immediately.

Remember, the reality of the person living with dementia is authentic to them even if it differs from what you are experiencing. It is important to respect their reality. This might mean going along with a story they are telling you that seems unreal to you.<sup>2</sup>

### Supporting a person to live well with dementia

For people living with dementia to maintain a sense of well-being, they need to live in a supportive social environment, where they are accepted, respected, have meaningful relationships and are supported to grow.

There are many ways to create a supportive environment:

- Get to know the person and show them respect (e.g., greet the person by name, use eye contact, actively communicate with and listen to the person).
- Connect with the person rather than correcting them. Share a moment with the person even if their reality or perception of the moment is different from yours own.
- Acknowledge the person's emotions and respond with respect and empathy.
- Work with the person, rather than for the person. Support the person to use their abilities and to have a say in decisions.
- Enable and support the person to do what he or she otherwise would not be able to do. Create opportunities for meaning and purpose.
- Go with the flow by adjusting to the person's needs and desires.
- Honour the daily rhythms and life patterns of the person.<sup>2</sup>

There are also supportive ways to approach and communicate with a person living with dementia:

- Approach a resident from the front, not from the side or rear.
- Always speak to the person at their level and face-to-face.
- Always be aware of the residents' personal space and learn where their comfort area is.
- Even if you have been working with a resident on a daily basis, a person living with dementia may not recognize you. Start off all interactions with a resident by introducing yourself.
- Slowly and calmly explain what you will be doing. You may have to show by actions or repeat what you have already said several times as you go along.
- If a resident is non-verbal, still ask them questions and read their body language. This helps to foster independence and provides an inclusive approach.
- Offer statements instead of open-ended questions. For example, "This white and blue top might be nice with these blue pants. Do you like this combination?"
- Remember that 30% of what we say is verbal and 70% is shown by our body language and residents can be very good at reading this.
- Ask the resident about themselves.
- Ask what their favourite things are, what brings them joy.
- Ask the resident to tell you how they would like something done.
- Encourage independence by assisting the resident to dress and undress themselves. What they are able to do for themselves may change day to day.

If a resident is uncomfortable with the activity of dressing or undressing, or needing help in the washroom it is important to be aware of the resident's level of anxiety surrounding the activity. If you learn something new about the resident, share what works with others so it can be added to their care plan.

### Dressing and undressing

Here are some tips for a safe and pleasant dressing and undressing experience for a resident living with dementia:

- Dressing includes considering a person's style, sensory and mobility needs (hearing aids, glasses, make-up, jewellery etc). Ensure you ask the resident about their style and needs.
- Think of the steps you take to dress yourself daily and remember they are likely the same steps this resident might take.
- Ask what activities they plan to do that day. Is there an activity going on that day that would require a change of time for getting dressed (i.e. bath day)/undressed (later evening program) or an event that would require a more formal attire?
- Offer the resident the opportunity to go to the washroom and/or brush their teeth before getting dressed/undressed.
- Provide choice, and limit options to make it easier for the resident (maybe provide two options).
- Check the label on the clothing to ensure it belongs to the resident.

## Supporting continence

Here are some useful tips for aiding residents in the washroom that will help to maintain their dignity and sense of independence:

- Notice when the resident gives signs about needing to use the washroom. This might be fidgeting, or tugging on clothing for example. Some people have a regular schedule, so it may be helpful to learn a resident's routine.<sup>3</sup>
- Think of the steps you take when using the toilet, and consider these while you help the resident.
- A resident may need help removing clothes. Ask them and if they do and help them remove their clothes slowly, encouraging them to help. You may need to give them reminders for example to pull their pants down before sitting down.
- Consider that if balance is problematic for a male resident, they may need to sit when they urinate to reduce the risk of falling.<sup>4</sup>
- Ensure that the resident isn't rushed, it may take time to empty the bladder or bowels. Walk away, step out of view for a few minutes, or stand outside the door until you are needed.<sup>4</sup>
- Hand the person toilet paper and ask if they need help.
- Help or remind the resident pull their pants back up while trying to give them as much privacy as possible.

## Acknowledgements

LIVING the Dementia Journey (LDJ) is an award-winning, evidence-informed training program for those who support people living with dementia. Participants gain awareness and understanding that changes not only the way they view dementia, but the way they support people living with it. LDJ was created by the Murray Alzheimer Research and Education Program in collaboration with people living with dementia and their care partners. For more information about LDJ visit [the-ria.ca/resources/living-the-dementia-journey/](http://the-ria.ca/resources/living-the-dementia-journey/)

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To learn more about person-centred care and culture change, visit [the-ria.ca/resources/working-together-to-put-living-first/](http://the-ria.ca/resources/working-together-to-put-living-first/)

## References

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