



DementiaUK

Helping families face dementia

Coping with distress Calming techniques for a person with dementia (and you)



Dementia and distress

Dementia is a progressive condition that can affect the way someone behaves. It is quite common for people with dementia to become distressed at times. They might show that they are distressed by:

- crying
- groaning
- shouting
- swearing or using other offensive language
- calling out for someone
- asking to go home (sometimes even if they are at home)
- behaving aggressively
- appearing agitated – eg pacing, fidgeting or trying to leave the house
- becoming withdrawn or uncommunicative

Causes of distress

When a person with dementia is distressed, it is often because they are trying to communicate something that they are unable to express.

Confusion, fear or anxiety

A person with dementia who is distressed may be feeling disorientated, frightened or anxious. They might be trying to make sense of the world around them, and they might see things quite differently from you – for instance, they might not recognise the place they are in as their home, or they might believe someone is trying to harm them.

It is often thought that people with dementia cannot experience depression or anxiety, but this is not the case. They may, however, be unable to express how they are feeling, leading to greater distress.

Unmet needs

A person with dementia may have an unmet need like being hungry or thirsty, or too hot or cold. They may be in discomfort or pain, for example from an existing health condition, or a problem like constipation or an infection. They may need the toilet, or be tired, bored or want to stretch their legs.



Changes in routine

Changes in routine can be distressing for a person with dementia. This can include doing things at a different time than usual, or going somewhere they do not usually go, such as a hospital appointment or a family gathering.

Visitors can also be unsettling due to the extra noise and activity. If the person is not used to seeing people, this may affect their confidence and their ability to interact with others without feeling distressed. They may also be upset if they don't recognise the person who has come to see them.

Sundowning

Some people with dementia feel more confused and distressed in the evening. This is known as sundowning. For more advice, read our information on sundowning – see Sources of support on p7 for details.

Past life events

Occasionally, people with dementia who have experienced past traumatic events – like a natural disaster, distressing family event, work-related accident, or other extreme incident – may relieve this trauma as their condition deteriorates.

Techniques to avoid or reduce distress in advance

These techniques may prevent a person with dementia becoming distressed in the first place.

- Try to maintain a daily routine where things happen at a predictable time
- Explain the situation to the people around you, so they know not to drop in at unexpected times or take the person out without advance notice
- Give the person information in easy to digest nuggets, and in a timely manner. For example, if you are going out, give them some advance notice – perhaps a few hours – so they are prepared, but not so much that they then forget. Be guided by your knowledge of the person – some feel more anxious if they are told in advance of a change to their routine
- Allow plenty of time to leave the house so the person doesn't feel rushed, and factor in extra time to get to your destination, for

example so there's time to go to the toilet before an appointment

- Try to pre-empt the person's needs – you might want to offer a drink and snack at regular intervals; help them choose their clothes for the day to make sure they are appropriate for the weather; or ask them if they need the toilet every couple of hours
- Find out as much as you can about the person's life history to increase your understanding of any possible trauma triggers, like a specific place, person or occurrence. You can then try to avoid those triggers, or offer more support if they occur. Read our information on compiling a Life Story for more details and a template – see Sources of support on p7

Calming techniques if the person becomes distressed

As a family member or close friend of the person with dementia, you are often the best person to give them reassurance. It's important to try to identify the cause of their



distress so you can take steps to help them.

If the person does become upset, there are some methods you can try to help them feel calmer.

- Try to remain calm yourself. The person might say something upsetting to you when they are distressed. Take five or 10 seconds and think about what you're going to say before you reply
- Use a soothing and steady tone of voice
- Try to maintain eye contact
- Maintain a calm, low stimulus environment if possible
- Look for signs that they have an unmet need – groaning or rubbing a body part may indicate that they have pain in that area, for example
- Give the person a hug
- Play some music they love, or a favourite film
- Look at photos together and talk about happy memories
- Sit beside the person and hold their hand
- Offer them a cup of tea and something to eat
- Suggest going into a different room or outside for a change of scene

- If the person is confused or disorientated by a situation or a change in routine, calmly explain what is happening
- Ask them what is upsetting them, and if they are able to answer, listen carefully to what they say, even if they are confused

Sometimes, none of these tips will work. And sometimes, it might seem like the more you try to calm the person down, the more upset they become. It can help to acknowledge that they are upset and then give them some space; perhaps go into a different room or outside for five minutes if it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Calming techniques for you

It can be very difficult when a person with dementia is distressed, but remind yourself that you are doing your best and try to be kind to yourself.

Here is a calming breathing technique that you can try: it's called the signal breath. It's designed to give you a moment to distance yourself from the stressful

situation you are in, before helping you come back to the here and now.

The person with dementia might also find this calming. You could try talking them through it.

- Take a deep breath in and tense your jaw, shoulders and arms
- Hold the breath for two or three seconds
- Then let the breath go, relaxing your jaw, shoulders and arms
- As you exhale, mentally say a soothing word to yourself, such as 'relax' or 'calm'
- Let your arms, shoulders and jaw go limp and loose



Our Admiral Nurses can help

If you would like to speak to a specialist Admiral Nurse about calming techniques for a person with dementia or for yourself, or any other aspects of dementia, please call the free Helpline.

Call **0800 888 6678** or email helpline@dementiauk.org



Opening hours: Monday-Friday, 9am-9pm,
Saturday-Sunday, 9am-5pm

If you prefer, you can pre-book a phone or video appointment with an Admiral Nurse: visit dementiauk.org/get-support/find-an-admiral-nurse/

Sources of support

You may find the following Dementia UK information helpful:

Creating a Life Story

dementiauk.org/creating-a-life-story

Sundowning

dementiauk.org/sundowning

Tips for better communication

dementiauk.org/tips-for-better-communication

Delirium (sudden confusion)

dementiauk.org/delirium

False beliefs and delusions in dementia

dementiauk.org/false-beliefs-and-delusions-in-dementia

Dealing with restlessness

dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness

The information in this booklet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses.

We are always looking to improve our resources, to provide the most relevant support for families living with dementia. If you have feedback about any of our leaflets, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

We receive no government funding and rely on voluntary donations, including gifts in Wills.

For more information on how to support Dementia UK, please visit dementiauk.org/donate or call **0300 365 5500**.

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If you're caring for someone with dementia or if you have any other concerns or questions, call or email our Admiral Nurses for specialist support and advice.

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dementiauk.org • info@dementiauk.org

Dementia UK, 7th Floor, One Aldgate, London EC3N 1RE
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