

Supporting meaningful connection when people are living with dementia

In Scotland, an estimated 90,000 people are living with dementia, with or without a formal diagnosis, and they account for approximately 65% of the care home population.

Importance of meaningful connection

Meaningful connection with others is important for everyone. Experiencing connections which are valued and meaningful has many benefits for people who live with dementia. It can improve wellbeing, support identity and personhood, boost self-esteem, and slow cognitive decline. However, over half of people living in care homes experience feelings of moderate to severe loneliness, which can significantly impact on quality of life and overall wellbeing. Certain types of communication, such as expressing themselves verbally or understanding what is said, may become more difficult when people are living with dementia, and they may withdraw from social interactions and activities as a result.

This factsheet provides strategies to support meaningful connection for people who are living with dementia. It focuses on people who live in care homes but will also be relevant in other settings. Of course, everyone is unique and will experience their dementia journey differently, but the strategies below have been helpful for many.

Relationships with family carers

Positive interactions and relationships with family and friends are associated with generally higher levels of wellbeing for people living with dementia. Family carers can provide emotional support, help people adjust to life in a care home and maintain contact with the wider world and extended family and friends.

However, many, though not all, family carers describe finding the changes in their loved one as difficult, struggling when they see cognitive abilities decreasing, and feeling they are losing connection.

Strategies for supporting connection will vary according to the needs and wishes of people living with dementia and their family carers. Some possible strategies to make time together more meaningful and enjoyable include:

- Carrying out meaningful activities together such as going for a walk, reading or listening to music together, or reminiscing by looking at photographs.
- Carrying out tasks which are meaningful to the person can make time together more enjoyable and satisfying, and help connect the person to their life and interests.
- Joining in activities together in the care home or sharing a mealtime together.
- Affectionate physical contact such as hugs and handholding can become more important when verbal communication becomes more difficult, as long as the person is comfortable with this.
- Arranging visits or outings at the “right time of day”, when the person is more alert and able to interact, can also be helpful.
- Getting out and about to familiar places together.
- “Just being there” and spending time together, even if conversation is limited.
- Using the “strategies for communication” below, when appropriate.

Relationships with staff

The relationship between people living with dementia and staff who are caring for them is an important factor influencing wellbeing. Research has found that positive interactions with staff are strongly associated with overall positive emotional wellbeing. However, if people become less able to communicate verbally, this can lead to negative impacts on wellbeing – for instance, increased stress and distress - if staff do not have the skills to overcome this.

Here are some strategies to build positive relationships.

- Find out what is important to the person and what their interests are and encourage conversations and activities that support this. Ensure this is included in care planning.
- Encourage people to express their thoughts and views, and contribute to conversations, including those about their care.
- Try to allocate key workers based on shared interests or personality, wherever possible.
- Be mindful of barriers such as hearing or visual impairment, and address these as far as possible.
- Encourage people to express any concerns or worries they have and ensure these are listened to and addressed wherever possible.
- Use reminiscence – engage the person in conversation about their experiences and memories. This can be comforting and stimulate conversation.
- Create opportunities for people to spend meaningful time with and get to know staff, for instance carrying out tasks or activities together.
- Support people to connect with the community beyond the care home and spend time in nature, either through going out and about or “bringing the outside in”.
- Create opportunities for fun and laughter.
- Use the strategies for communication below, when appropriate.

Strategies for communication

While everyone is different, some of the following strategies have been found to be helpful in aiding communication when people are living with dementia.

- Avoid outpacing – speak clearly in a positive, friendly tone and allow the person plenty of time to respond. Use short and simple sentences. Give simple choices, perhaps supported with a visual representation, and rephrase questions if the person does not understand.

- Use eye contact, gestures, facial expression, and (where appropriate) physical touch, such as touching the person's hand, to aid communication.
- Ensure body language is relaxed and open.
- Use names of people and objects when talking about them.
- Try to avoid guessing what the person is trying to say – allow them time to complete their thoughts and choose their words.
- Be patient and respectful. Speak to the person as an adult – don't speak to others in their presence as if they are not there.
- Acknowledge and validate the person's emotions, even if you don't fully understand their words. This can help them feel heard and supported.
- Consider using non-verbal methods such as pictures, writing, or other communication aids to help communication, if appropriate for the person.
- Avoid a noisy, distracting environment where possible.
- Don't correct the person if they are making mistakes. Acknowledge their reality.
- Be prepared to adjust your communication approach based on the person's needs and responses. What works one day may not work the next.

Some useful resources

[Bradford Well-being Profile](#) - an observational tool which can help services to understand where the person finds joy, and what may be the barriers to this, supporting development of the personal plan.

[The King's Fund 'Is your care home dementia friendly?'](#) audit helps services to assess if the space is supporting connection and social opportunities.

[Life story books](#) help to gain an understanding of what is important to the person, for inclusion in personal plans.

[Enriched model of psychological needs poster](#) - while this was developed during the pandemic, it still has relevant information.