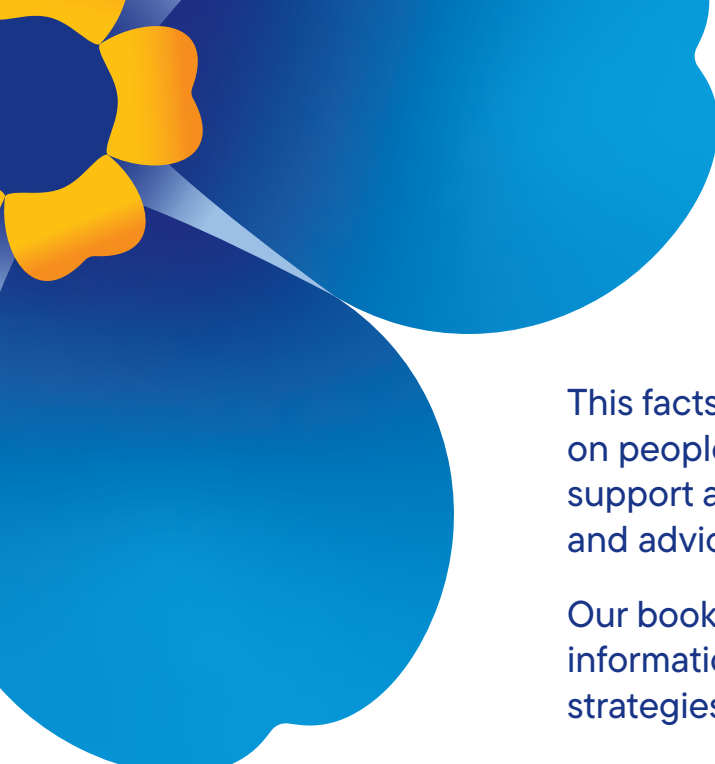


Supporting a person with memory loss



Together we are help & hope
for everyone living with dementia



This factsheet explains the impact of memory loss on people living with dementia. It looks at ways to support a person with memory loss with practical tips and advice.

Our booklet 1540, **The memory handbook** provides information and practical advice including coping strategies for people with memory loss.

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1 Memory loss and dementia

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It is common for people with dementia to experience memory loss. This is because dementia is caused by damage to the brain, and this damage can affect areas of the brain involved in creating and retrieving memories.

Memory loss can be a symptom of any type of dementia. For people with Alzheimer's disease, it is often among the very first signs.

Memory can be affected in different ways. These include:

- **not being able to create new memories** – this means that recent events are not 'recorded' in the person's memory and so cannot be recalled later. For example, the person may forget a conversation they have just had.
- **taking longer to retrieve information** – this means that, even though the person is still able to recall things, this takes them much longer or they might need a prompt. For example, they might need more time to find the name for an object.
- **not being able to retrieve information** – this means that, even though the person may be able to create new memories, they are not able to access them when needed. For example, they may get lost in familiar surroundings or on journeys they have taken many times.

Memory loss affects everyone differently but many people with dementia experience some of the following:

- forgetting recent conversations or events
- struggling to find the right word in a conversation
- forgetting names of people and objects
- losing or misplacing items (such as keys or glasses)
- getting lost in familiar surroundings or on familiar journeys
- forgetting how to carry out familiar tasks (such as making a cup of tea)
- forgetting appointments or anniversaries
- not being able to keep track of medication, and whether or when it has been taken
- struggling to recognise faces of people they know well.

These changes may be more visible to family and friends than to the person themselves. For ideas on how to support someone with these memory problems, see section 3 'Practical tips for supporting someone with memory loss' on page 5.

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Older memories – which have been recalled or spoken about more often – are more firmly established than newer memories. This means that a person with dementia may forget recent events but still be able to recall detailed memories from earlier life.

In the same way, people with dementia may still be able to remember things that they have repeated many times in their life, such as a route to school. This also includes skills that involved a lot of practice, like playing a musical instrument or driving.

People with dementia may also be able to remember more emotional events, such as weddings or birthday parties. This is because memory also has an emotional aspect to it. This emotional memory is usually affected much later on in dementia.

This means that a person with dementia may remember how they feel about an event even if they have forgotten the details of it. For example, they may not remember where they went on holiday or that a friend came to visit, but they may still feel happy about it after.

This emotional memory can be triggered by senses, such as hearing a certain piece of music or smelling a certain fragrance.

2 The emotional impact of memory loss

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Everyone reacts differently to memory loss. It can cause a range of emotions in both the person with dementia and those supporting them.

Helping the person with memory loss to manage their emotions

Some people with dementia may not seem troubled by their memory loss, while others may find it frustrating and upsetting. The person may lose self-confidence and be embarrassed by their difficulties. They may begin to withdraw from social situations or stop doing things they usually do.

Memory loss can also lead to people misplacing items that they then might think others have moved or stolen. This can sometimes cause anger and mistrust between the person with dementia and those around them. See 'Losing items' on page 7 for more advice on this.

It can be helpful to be aware of these difficulties and find ways to provide support. The following suggestions might help:

- If the person is ready to, encourage them to talk about how they are feeling. If they are frustrated or upset because of their memory difficulties, it can help to talk through some of the issues with them.
- Look for different ways to manage some of the day-to-day problems they are having. For suggestions, see section 3 'Practical tips for supporting someone with memory loss' on page 5.
- If the person is worried about the future, try to understand their concerns and help them focus on the present. Think of what they can still do and encourage or support them to continue doing these things. There are approaches which can help rebuild confidence in people with memory loss – see section 4 'Structured approaches for supporting someone with memory loss' on page 14.
- Encourage the person to continue spending time with other people and to take part in meaningful activities that do not rely as much on memory, such as word or number games.
- If the person is frustrated because of their memory problems, they may get distressed or agitated. In these cases, it may be best to gently change the conversation or activity. For more information on changes in behaviour and tips on how to cope with these, see factsheet 525, **Changes in behaviour**.

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Managing your emotions as a carer for someone with memory loss

If you are supporting a person with dementia who is living with memory loss, you are also likely to feel a range of emotions. For example, if the person is recalling earlier happy memories, it can sometimes be nice to reminisce together. This can make you feel closer to the person.

But it can also be difficult to care for someone with memory loss. For example, you may feel embarrassed if the person forgets who someone is, or if they no longer remember how to carry out a task. Or you might feel sad that the person has forgotten memories that you share with them. It can be tiring and frustrating to be asked the same question many times, and this might make you feel guilty. You may also feel unsure about what you can talk about with the person without relying too much on their memory.

It is natural to feel these emotions when caring for someone with memory loss. Reminding yourself that the person's difficulties are because of their dementia may help you to deal with these feelings. It is also worth reminding yourself that, by supporting the person, you are making a positive difference to their life. If you need advice or support, you can call Alzheimer's Society's Dementia Support Line on **0333 150 3456**.

When caring for someone else, the needs of that person often come before your own. This can make it difficult for you take care of yourself. However, it is just as important to look after your own physical and mental health. For more advice on improving your wellbeing, see factsheet 523, **Carers – looking after yourself**. You might also find it helpful to join a local support group for carers. Use our dementia directory tool to find one near you – **alzheimers.org.uk/dementiadirectory**

If you are trying to process how the person's memory loss is making you feel, you may find a talking therapy useful. These will allow you to explore your feelings in private. To get in touch with a therapist, you can speak to your GP or you can find a private therapist by contacting the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (see 'Other useful organisations' on page 16). For more information on talking therapies, see the section on carer support in factsheet 444, **Supporting a person with dementia who has depression, anxiety or apathy**.

3 Practical tips for supporting someone with memory loss

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There are many practical ways that you can support a person with dementia who is having difficulties with their memory. Some suggestions are listed in this section.

There are also more structured approaches that can improve the person's quality of life on a more long-term basis. For more information on these, see section 4 'Structured approaches for supporting someone with memory loss' on page 14.

It is important to support the person with dementia to do as much as possible, and for as long as possible.

Forgetting recent conversations or events

People with dementia may find it hard to remember recent conversations and events, even in the early stages. It is important to keep in mind that the person isn't being difficult. Due to the damage that is causing the person's dementia, their brain may not have stored the information. This means that they cannot bring back the memory of the event or discussion because they may not have that memory.

How you can help

- Pictures and written descriptions can be useful records of things that have happened. Encourage the person to use a diary, journal or calendar to record events and conversations.
- If the person repeats a question, it won't help to tell them that they have heard the information before. Give simple answers and repeat them as needed. You can also write the answer down so that the person has a note of it.
- If the person can't remember whether they have done something or not, try to give context to your question and include prompts. For example, 'It must be a while since you ate breakfast, are you hungry?' rather than, 'Have you had breakfast?'
- If the person does not remember a conversation you have had with them recently, keep in mind that this is not because they weren't listening. If the conversation was important, it might be worth having it again.

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He would say things that were out of character and make decisions he wouldn't usually make. He would also forget things, like the names of food.

Carer of a person
with dementia

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Forgetting names and words

People with dementia may have difficulties finding the right word in a conversation. They might feel stuck because the word is 'on the tip of their tongue'. They may confuse one word for another – for example, saying 'glue' instead of 'shoe'. They may also forget the meaning of certain words.

In a similar way, a person with dementia might forget people's names, even those of friends or family members whom they have known for a long time and are close to.

These difficulties can make it harder to communicate with a person with dementia. However, there are a number of ways to support conversation.

How you can help

- If the person is tired or stressed, it will be harder for them to remember words and names. If this is the case, it might be better to have the conversation at a different time, when the person is feeling more relaxed.
- If the person is struggling to find a word, don't rush them. Give them enough time to say what they are trying to say. If they feel under pressure, this might make it more difficult for them.
- If you are not sure what the person is trying to tell you, consider the context of what they are saying. This may give you clues about the word they are looking for.
- If the person doesn't understand a word you are using, try using prompts, cues and context to help with naming items. The person may recognise an object and what it is used for, even if they can't remember what it is called.
- If the person is struggling to remember someone's name, don't put them on the spot. Instead, try to find tactful ways to remind them without highlighting that they have forgotten the person's name – for example, 'Here's your friend, Elena'.
- Ask the person if it would be helpful for other people to introduce themselves before they speak. This may depend on how the person with dementia feels about their memory difficulties and whether they are happy for others to know about these.
- Consider using a 'memory book' or 'memory box' with photos and brief information on people (such as their name and the story of how the person knows them). The person with dementia can then refer to this if they want to.

For more ideas on ways to communicate with a person with dementia, see factsheet 500, **Communicating**.

Losing items

People with dementia often lose items as a result of their memory loss. They may misplace common items, such as glasses or keys, or put an item somewhere for safekeeping and then forget where it is. They may also leave items in unusual places – for example, leaving the remote control in the bathroom, or tea bags in the fridge.

If the person thinks an item should be somewhere and it's not, this may lead them to think that someone is hiding or stealing things from them. This is a type of delusion. It can be difficult both for the person and those around them. It can help to try see things from their point of view. The person with dementia is trying to make sense of their reality and what is happening. For more information on delusions, see factsheet 527, **Changes in perception**.

It is also important to note that there may be truth in what the person is saying – don't dismiss it because they have dementia.

How you can help

- Try to keep items in places where the person is used to them being – for example, hanging keys on a specific hook or always keeping them in the same drawer.
- Consider getting copies of items that are important or often misplaced, such as keys, glasses or important documents.
- Keep rooms and drawers tidy so that things are less likely to get lost and easier to find if they are misplaced. Put items that are often used where they can be seen and are easily accessible.
- Consider getting a tray marked 'letters' or 'post' to make sure that these do not get misplaced. This can also allow you to double-check important items such as GP appointment letters or test results, as long as the person consents to this.
- Use visual clues to explain where items go, such as pictures or photos stuck to cupboard doors as reminders of what goes inside them.
- Consider a locator device to help find items that often get lost, such as keys. For more information on these, see factsheet 437, **Using technology to help with everyday life**.
- When looking for a lost item, use your knowledge of the person to help you think where they might have put things.
- If the person puts items in unusual places but this doesn't pose a risk to anyone in the household, it may be best to leave things as they are.

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Having difficulties with day-to-day tasks

As dementia progresses, the person will have more difficulties with daily tasks, such as getting dressed, making a cup of tea or taking medication. This may be because these tasks involve following a set of steps, and the person with dementia cannot remember in what order these steps are supposed to be followed.

When a person is having difficulties with familiar tasks, it can be worrying. You may be concerned about their safety and ability to manage. You may feel like stopping the person from doing certain tasks, or doing these tasks for them. However, it is important to support the person to do as much as possible for themselves, for as long as they can.

How you can help

- Help the person to perform tasks by breaking them down into smaller, simpler steps. It can help to write short instructions and place them nearby.
- Consider the time of day when the person is usually more able to concentrate and try to schedule tasks for these times if you can. For example, they might find it easier to focus in the morning.
- Try to keep to the person's usual routine. This gives a framework to the day or week that doesn't rely on their memory. For example, if the person always watches the news at 5pm, or goes to the shops on a Thursday, then continuing this routine can help them stay oriented and engaged.
- Reduce distractions, such as background noise, to help the person focus on the task at hand.
- Make sure that items that the person uses regularly are clearly visible to them. Make tasks easier by putting out the items which the person will need to complete that task – for example, place tea bags and a mug near the kettle.
- Use reminders, such as sticky notes or a wall calendar, for one-off tasks. Set up more permanent reminders for regular tasks – for example, a sign by the front door to remind the person to take their keys and wallet if they leave the house.
- Think about using assistive technology. These are devices that can help people with dementia manage everyday activities – for example, using electronic pill boxes to remind the person to take daily medication. Assistive technology can also help to reduce danger – for example, through using gas valves and smoke alarms. For more information see factsheet 437, **Using technology to help with everyday life**.
- Talk to an occupational therapist. They will be able to advise on coping strategies and suitable devices for help with day-to-day tasks. For more information see booklet 819, **Making your home dementia friendly**.

Getting lost outside the home

A person with dementia may want to leave the house for any number of reasons. These could include exercising or going to the shops. This type of activity can help the person maintain some independence and boost their wellbeing.

Such a trip may involve the person taking familiar routes or heading towards an area that they know well. Despite this, the person may set off somewhere and then forget where they were going or why. They may also have problems recognising their environment, which can lead to them getting lost or coming to harm. This can be distressing for the person and for their carer.

It can be especially worrying if the person gets lost while driving. If this is the case, the person with dementia may have to stop driving, or you may need to look at ways to manage this, such as only driving with another person in the car. For more information see factsheet 439, **Driving and dementia**.

How you can help

- If the person gets lost when going out alone, consider going out with them, or arranging for someone else to do so.
- If the person is happy to, it can help if other people who live nearby are told about the person's difficulties. This can include people like neighbours and local shopkeepers. They may be able to help if the person gets lost.
- The person may find that having a mobile phone is useful. There are easy-to-use mobiles available if the person is not used to having one. These are available to buy from Alzheimer's Society's online shop (see 'Other useful organisations' on page 16).
- Consider using other assistive technology products, such as a GPS device. These use satellite technology to locate the person if they get lost. This can be reassuring for both the person and those around them. For more information see factsheet 437, **Using technology to help with everyday life**.
- Make sure the person has some form of identification when they go out, as well as contact numbers of people they know well. An emergency identification device, such as those provided by MedicAlert®, may be helpful (see 'Other useful organisations' on page 16). Alzheimer's Society also provide helpcards that people with dementia can carry around with them in case they need assistance when out in the community. These are available to order from **alzheimers.org.uk/orderpublications**

For more advice on managing the risks of a person with dementia getting lost outside the home, see factsheet 501, **Walking and dementia**.

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Getting lost in a home setting

People with dementia may forget the layout of the home they are in and become confused about where each room is located. This can lead to the person getting lost within the home.

Sometimes, a person with dementia does not recognise the house they are in at all. As their dementia progresses, they may say that they want to 'go home', even when they are in a home setting. This could be because the person does not remember that the place they are now in is where they currently live. They may be recalling a former home, such as where they lived as a child, and be confused that they are not there now.

In some cases, this isn't about wanting to return to an actual home, but about returning to that feeling of 'home'. This can happen if the person feels uncomfortable or distressed, and is looking for the positive emotions associated with being at home.

How you can help

- If the person is recalling a home that they used to live in, speak with them about this other home, and what it means for them. This may help them to place it in the past.
- Don't try to convince the person that they are home, or that this is where they live now. Instead, reassure them that they are safe, and encourage them to talk about the way they are feeling. For example, 'What is it that you like about your home?' – this may help you to work out what the person needs in order to feel more comfortable.
- Make sure that the person is surrounded with familiar items that will help them feel at home. These can include ornaments, photographs or other objects with a personal connection.
- Keep a reminder of the current home address by the front door, in the living area or in the person's room. This can help to remind the person of where they are.
- If the person forgets the layout of the home, try putting up signs on internal doors to help them find the bathroom, kitchen and other rooms they may use regularly. Dementia-friendly signs are available to buy from Alzheimer's Society's online shop (see 'Other useful organisations' on page 16).
- Leave internal doors open so that the person can see easily into each room and consider leaving the bathroom light on during the night. For more tips on making the home a better space for people with dementia, see booklet 819, **Making your home dementia friendly**.

Forgetting upcoming events

People with dementia may forget upcoming events, such as medical appointments, visits and anniversaries. This can cause problems if you're not always around to remind the person beforehand.

How you can help

- Think about how the person remembered events in the past. Using a similar technique is likely to work better than trying to learn a new one.
- Help the person to use calendars and clocks to remind them of upcoming events. Place them where the person with dementia will see them, such as on the bedside table or by the phone.
- If the person has an online calendar on their mobile phone, tablet or computer, consider entering reminders for upcoming events and appointments. Virtual assistants such as Amazon's Alexa and Apple's Siri can also be useful for this purpose.
- If the person is given an appointment card, put it where the person can easily see it. For example, you could pin it to a noticeboard.
- If the person uses a mobile phone, ask whether a reminder text could be sent to them before their appointment (for example, with the doctor, dentist or hairdresser). If the person gives their consent, the reminder could also be sent to your phone.

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Mum doesn't
always know
who I am, though
she knows I'm
someone she
trusts. The work
gets harder...but
I love her. Life's
hard, and it can
also be rewarding.

Carer of a person
with dementia

”

Struggling to recognise faces

As the person's dementia progresses, they may begin to have difficulty recognising familiar faces, including their own reflection. This can make the person feel as though there are intruders in their home – for example, if they see their reflection in a mirror and don't recognise themselves, or don't recognise friends who have come to visit.

People with dementia may also experience 'time-shifting'. This is when the person believes that they are living at an earlier time in their life and that they are younger than they are now. They also expect the people around them to be younger as well. This can then lead to them mistaking younger relatives for people they know or used to know. For example, they may think that their child is their partner or that their brother or sister is their parent.

In the same way, when the person is time-shifted, they may not recognise their children. This could be because they don't believe that they are old enough to have children, especially adult children. For more information on time-shifting, see factsheet 527, **Changes in perception**.

Not recognising familiar people can be distressing for both the person with dementia and those around them. It is important to try not to take it personally. Even if the person doesn't seem to recognise those most familiar to them, they will still have an emotional attachment to those people and feel close to them. For example, even if they do not seem to know you are their child or partner, you are someone who makes them feel safe or happy.

How you can help

- Try tactful ways to give cues or reminders without mentioning the person's memory loss. For example, 'Hasn't our grandson grown?'
- Consider using aids like a 'memory book' with pictures of family and friends, or keep albums and photos nearby.
- Reassure the person and try to make them feel safe and comfortable. If they don't recognise people, they may feel that they are surrounded by strangers and get distressed.
- Try not to show the person that you are offended or upset if they do not recognise you – it is unlikely to be a personal rejection. Focus on how the person responds to you in the moment. For example, even if they don't seem to recognise you, they may still smile or want to speak with you.
- Someone with dementia may still recognise people's voices or the way they smell. Hearing a person speak or smelling someone's perfume or aftershave may help them to recognise that person.

If someone you care for does not recognise you, this can be upsetting. Try to talk about how you feel with someone you trust. Dementia Support Forum is an online discussion forum where you can talk with other people who are going through similar things. They may be able to give advice, share practical suggestions, or just offer understanding. Go to **forum.alzheimers.org.uk**

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Forgetting beliefs and aspects of identity

As the person's dementia progresses, they may forget or misremember certain beliefs or aspects of their identity which have been important to them. This can include religious beliefs and practices, aspects of sexual orientation and gender identity, and dietary choices, such as being vegan or vegetarian.

It can be difficult to know what to do in these situations. Try to use what you know about the person and respect their preferences and beliefs as much as possible. Always consider what is in the best interests of the person. This will mean trying to find a balance between respecting the beliefs that you know were important to the person before with the beliefs that they currently hold, which may be different.

How you can help

- If the person has forgotten that they used to follow a particular diet, such as veganism, they may now want to eat certain foods that they did not used to eat. However, if the person eats types of food that they have not eaten for some time (or ever), this could affect their digestion. If possible, speak to a dietician or to the person's GP before the person begins eating these foods. For more advice on this, see factsheet 511, **Eating and drinking**.
- If the person has forgotten aspects of their faith that used to be important to them, think of other aspects of worship that they might still enjoy or respond to. For example, they may still enjoy religious music and songs, and may take comfort in holding or wearing symbols of their faith. There may also be religious rituals or practices that they have always followed which they can still take part in or watch, either in person or online.
- If a lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans person with dementia has memory problems, they may forget important aspects of their sexual identity. For example, they may forget that they have told their family and friends about their sexuality, or that they have lived openly as a different gender, possibly for a large part of their life. For more information on supporting a person with this, see factsheet 480, **Supporting an LGBTQ+ person with dementia**.

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4 Structured approaches for supporting someone with memory loss

There are a number of different approaches that can help people with dementia cope with memory loss and the feelings it can cause. Some of these techniques may require the help of professionals, such as nurses, counsellors or therapists, but they can also be useful for family carers. These approaches can help to improve quality of life for the person with dementia.

Life story and reminiscence work

Life story work involves the person with dementia making a personal record of important experiences, people and places in their life. They can do this with the help of someone else, such as a family member or care professional. Their personal record can take the form of a book, photo album or something they create digitally – for example, through a tablet or smartphone app.

Reminiscence work is similar to life story work. It involves encouraging a person with dementia to talk about a period, event or subject from their past. It can be done in groups or on a one-to-one basis. The person can try reminiscence work with a professional, friend or family member.

Reminiscence is often done using prompts such as music, objects and photos, which can be general or specific to the person. For example, if the person has always enjoyed travelling, looking at photos from places they have visited can be enjoyable to them. Visit Alzheimer's Society's online shop for products to help with reminiscence activities (see 'Other useful organisations' on page 16).

Many people find life story and reminiscence work enjoyable as these approaches allow them to look back on their lives and rediscover past experiences. They can help to maintain the person's self-esteem, confidence and sense of self. These activities can also be used as a prompt for conversation and can improve the person's social interactions with others. They can also help professional carers understand more about the person.

Life story and reminiscence work may sometimes bring back difficult or sad memories, and the person may become upset. If this happens, the person should be supported to express their feelings and to address the memory if they are comfortable doing so.

Cognitive stimulation therapy (CST)

Cognitive stimulation therapy (CST) involves activities and exercises that encourage thinking, concentration, communication and memory in the person with dementia. It involves talking about day-to-day interests, past events and memories, and information relating to the current time and place. This can be done in one-to-one sessions or in a group setting.

CST is recommended for people with mild to moderate dementia, rather than for the later stages. It is offered to people with dementia through NHS trusts and memory clinics. To find out more about CST, speak to the person's GP or memory clinic.

Cognitive rehabilitation

Cognitive rehabilitation is a type of therapy that involves the person with dementia working together with a therapist on specific skills that they would like to develop. For example, they could focus on learning a new skill, such as using a mobile phone, or rediscovering a skill that they used to enjoy, such as cooking.

This approach focuses on what is important to the person and those closest to them. It can help people with dementia to focus on the skills, abilities and knowledge that they still have. It can also help with memory and attention. To find out more about cognitive rehabilitation, speak to the person's GP or memory clinic.

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Other useful organisations

Alzheimer's Society online shop
0333 366 0035 (8.30am–5.30pm Monday–Friday)
alzheimers.shop@partridgesuk.com
alzheimers.org.uk/shop

Alzheimer's Society's online shop offers a wide range of products to help with everyday life for people living with dementia.

AlzProducts
024 7642 2224 (10am–3pm Monday–Friday)
www.alzproducts.co.uk

The AlzProducts shop sells specialist dementia aids and equipment.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)
01455 883300 (10am–4pm Monday–Friday)
bacp@bacp.co.uk
www.bacp.co.uk

The BACP provides information on counselling and psychotherapy services, including a list of local counsellors and psychotherapists.

Counselling Directory
0333 325 2500 (10am–4pm Monday–Friday)
www.counselling-directory.org.uk

The Counselling Directory website includes a searchable database of counsellors and psychotherapist. It also has information about how talking therapies may help.

Healthcare Pro
customerservice@healthcarepro.co.uk
www.healthcarepro.co.uk

Healthcare Pro provides products and services designed to support independent living.

MedicAlert®
**01908 951045 (8am–3.30pm Monday–Friday,
9am–3pm Saturday)**
info@medicalert.org.uk
www.medicalert.org.uk

MedicAlert® provide services and jewellery to help ensure someone's wishes are followed, should they be unable to communicate themselves in an emergency situation.



Factsheet 526

Last reviewed: January 2021

Next review due: January 2024

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This factsheet has also been reviewed by people affected by dementia.

To give feedback on this factsheet, or for a list of sources, please email [**publications@alzheimers.org.uk**](mailto:publications@alzheimers.org.uk)

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We are reviewing this publication. If you would like to give us any feedback, you can email us at publications@alzheimers.org.uk or call us at 020 7423 7455

At Alzheimer's Society we're working towards a world where dementia no longer devastates lives. We do this by giving help to everyone who needs it today, and hope for everyone in the future.

We have more information on **Adjusting to caring for someone with dementia**.

For advice and support on this, or any other aspect of dementia, call us on **0333 150 3456** or visit **alzheimers.org.uk**

Thanks to your donations, we're able to be a vital source of support and a powerful force for change for everyone living with dementia. Help us do even more, call **0330 333 0804** or visit **alzheimers.org.uk/donate**



**Together we are help & hope
for everyone living with dementia**

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