

Communication and social interactions

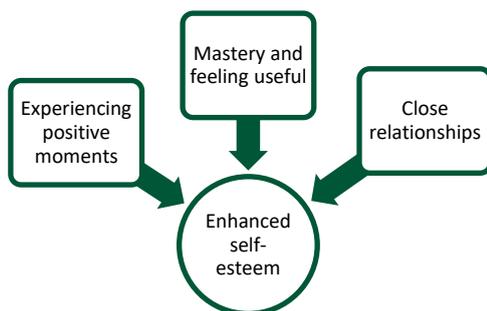
Dementia often leads to significant changes for the person with dementia and their loved ones. Friends and others in their social network are also affected to a certain extent. It is natural to experience grief and uncertainty about the future. Many will react with sadness, anger and anxiety. Frustration and conflicts may arise, and relationships may be put to the test.

One reaction may be to withdraw and avoid all contact. The level of openness about dementia will vary among people with dementia and their families. For the vast majority, receiving information and maintaining contact with others will have a positive effect.

Activities and social contact are important. Most will find it enjoyable to continue with familiar activities. Next of kin, healthcare professionals and others can provide necessary assistance and support. Technology and assistive devices can also provide security and promote independence.

Important in daily life

A sense of mastery and feeling useful is important to everyone. It is upsetting to experience difficulties with social situations. Positive moments and relationships can help enhance self-esteem and promote a sense of dignity.



People with dementia do not lose all their skills. Everyone benefits from feeling they still matter to others. But it is also satisfying to be able to manage activities on one's own.

For couples and families, it is often important to continue doing activities together, if possible. This may require certain adaptations.

Significant changes in communication and interactions:

Attention – Focusing attention on several things at once can be challenging.

Learning and memory – New information will be harder to remember. Recognition is often easier than recall. Recall means remembering events or names without reminders or other help. Recognition involves using details in the environment as clues to help remember things.

Language – Difficulties with understanding, speaking and finding the right words. It is often easier to remember one's first language than languages learnt later in life.

Sensations – The sense of sight, hearing, smell and taste may be reduced.

Dementia will make it gradually more difficult to remember and understand what others are saying, especially when many people are present and talking at the same time. It is therefore important to make sure there are not too many sounds or impressions that could disturb the situation. It will often be necessary to repeat information.

The person with dementia may find it difficult to answer complex questions, provide reasons, and explain things. Recounting episodes and events can be a good way to communicate. For next of kin and others, it can be useful to consider how best to communicate by sharing experiences, trying to understand and making themselves understood.

Tips for communication

- Use brief, simple sentences and avoid abstract concepts and explanations.
- Avoid challenging failing memories, and try to not ask: "Don't you remember ... ?"
- Refrain from asking difficult questions starting with "why", "how" and "who", which would require them to remember.
- Be clear, use simple language and bring up one topic at a time.
- Do not give unnecessary and superfluous information.
- Help when there is a halt in communication but try not to take over.
- Use clear body language.
- Take your time and remain calm during interactions.

Additional challenges for communication

Conversations and relationships may sometimes be particularly difficult because the person with dementia and their next of kin have entirely different perceptions of reality. There may be differing perspectives on what has been said and done, assessments of a situation and what type of help is needed. When something is forgotten, it rarely helps to insist on being right. Many next of kin become tired of listening to the same topics and to repeated questions.

Dealing with suspicions and accusations (e.g. delusions of theft or infidelity) can be particularly challenging. The same applies when the person with dementia describes or engages with something or someone who is not there (hallucinations). In such situations, it is even more important that their next of kin have someone to talk to, and that they can receive advice and assistance from health and care services.

Focus on the familiar

Most people like to do things they are familiar with, even after developing dementia. It is often meaningful for both next of kin and others to focus on the individual's history, culture and language. Familiar surroundings and objects can evoke memories and be a good starting point for conversation and interactions.

One tip is to actively contribute by mentioning familiar episodes and events, and talking about close relatives and other important people in their lives. Conversations about what is and what has been important earlier in the person's life can help confirm their history and value. It is essential to be understanding and tolerant. Not many words are needed to ensure a sense of belonging.

For people who are closely connected to nature, animals and traditional foods, these may be a good starting point for conversations and activities. Here, next of kin and others can help revive memories. When language is impaired, it is useful to consider how to **stimulate the senses** in ways best suited to the individual.

Looking at photos and videos of familiar places and people. Enjoying nature, flowers and colours.

Listening to music, poems, songs and "yoiking" can stimulate singing and dancing, and inspire fellowship and enjoyment.

Smelling and tasting familiar food and drinks can result in recognition and affirmation. The same applies to many other familiar scents and flavours.

Feeling heat and cold, certain fabrics, skins and furs, and not least skin contact through touch can evoke memories and provide affirmation.

Movement can also evoke memories, and earlier skills may be expressed through familiar situations, such as kneading dough, sweeping a floor, petting animals, or dancing.

By facilitating different activities suited to the individual, next of kin and others can help create experiences that ensure recognition and affirmation. This can help boost self-esteem.

Openness

Being open with family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances can make it easier for others to understand the situation. Families and networks also require knowledge about dementia in order to offer help and support in daily life.

Meeting others who are in a similar situation, sharing stories and listening to other experiences is important for many next of kin. Both health and care services and voluntary organisations can provide services. Caregiver schools and discussion groups are a couple of examples of forums where next of kin can receive good advice and tips and learn from one another.

When offering services, it is essential to consider the individual's background, lifestyle and traditions. Knowledge of the person's history and culture is valuable for ensuring that person-centred care and activities are perceived as meaningful.

References and literature tips: Ageing and health: *Utfordringer og muligheter - samvær med personer med demens* (2013), *Jeg er minnene mine* (2017), DVD *Kommunikasjon og holdninger* (2012). Norwegian Health Association: *Håndbok for pårørende* (2017). Utviklingscenter for sykehjem og hjemmetjenester for den samiske befolkningen i Finnmark: *Hva skal jeg gjøre i dag, tro?* (2013). **This theme sheet has been developed by the Norwegian National Centre for Ageing and Health on behalf of the Norwegian Directorate of Health, as part of the Dementia Plan 2020.**

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