

For a person living with dementia, [language](#) and communication can become more difficult over time. The type of difficulties a person will face as [dementia progresses](#) will be different for each individual.

The type and stage of their dementia will also be a factor. While the person living with the condition may have difficulties with finding the right word, the words that other people use are important too.

Good [communication](#) can be key to helping somebody to live well with dementia. Here are a few of the words and questions it may be best to avoid in conversation.

[7 things to avoid saying to somebody with dementia](#)

1. 'Remember when...?'

While it can be tempting to try and jog the memory of somebody living with dementia, this kind of question is often a reminder of memories lost. It can also sometimes feel like the person is being tested.

This can be a frustrating or painful experience, and there's also no evidence that prompting the person in this way will help them to recall or hold on to memories. It can be pleasant and comforting to talk about the past, however, it's usually more helpful to lead the conversation and allow the person to join in.

Try this instead:

Instead of posing a question, try leading with 'I remember when...'. That way, the person can search their memory calmly without feeling embarrassed, then join in if they like.

2. 'I've just told you that'

It can be difficult answering the same question several times, especially when you are trying to keep frustration or upset from your voice.

However, reminding the person that you have just answered their question will not help them retain the information for next time, it is likely to just remind them of their condition. This can be distressing for you both.

Try this instead:

Try to answer [repeated questions](#) calmly and patiently. If you feel the need, take a break, and remove yourself from the conversation for a while.

Remember that the person cannot help repeating themselves, and it is important for them to feel heard and understood.

3. 'Your brother died 10 years ago'

A person living with dementia may forget about a past [bereavement](#) or ask for somebody who has died. Reminding them of a loved one's death can be very painful, and they may react as though hearing the news for the first time all over again.

How to respond to these types of difficult questions will vary for different circumstances, however, it's always important to show sensitivity and minimise any distress. Try this instead:

Try not to avoid the question, as this can cause the person to feel more [anxious](#). For some, encouraging them to talk about the person they are asking about can be comforting.

Find out how the person is feeling, sometimes asking about a particular family member or friend is due to the person having an unmet need.

4. 'What did you do this morning?'

Avoid asking too many open-ended questions about the past, as it could be stressful for a person with dementia if they can't remember the answer. While it might seem polite to ask somebody about their day, it's better to focus on what's happening in the present.

Try this instead:

Instead of asking them about their day, speak briefly about your day and give them time to ask you questions about it.

They might then offer information about what they have done. Talk to them about the present and use items in the environment such as photos or ornaments to stimulate conversation.

5. 'Do you recognize me?'

It can be distressing when somebody with dementia doesn't recognize you, especially if you have a close relationship with them. Remember that it is likely to be upsetting for them to not recognize people around them too.

Asking the person if they know who you are can make them feel guilty or anxious if they don't remember or offended if they do.

Try this instead:

The way you greet somebody with dementia might change depending on the stage of their condition – judge for yourself but keep it friendly. A warm hello could suffice, or it may help to say your name and your relationship to them.

6. 'Let's have a cup of tea now, then after that we can go for nice walk and get lunch in that café you like in town.'

Long, complex sentences can be difficult to grasp for somebody with dementia. It's difficult to process several ideas at once as cognitive abilities slow down, so it's better to give directions or instructions one step at a time.

Try this instead:

Use short, simple sentences as much as possible. Avoid speaking in loud environments and wait until you have the person's full attention before you start a conversation.

7. 'Do you need some help with that, love?'

Words like 'love', 'honey' and 'dear' can sometimes be patronising for people living with dementia. This is particularly true if this is not how they were referred to before having dementia. This is sometimes referred to as 'elderspeak' and can cause older people to feel infantilised.

Try this instead:

Always remember the person behind the dementia, using their name as often as appropriate. This helps keep their dignity intact and aids concentration too.

This article was first published in 2017 and most recently updated in January 2023.