

Advice on engaging with people living with dementia

by Dr Jennifer Bute

We are very glad to share here some advice drafted by Dr Jennifer Bute about how best to engage with people with dementia. Jennifer is a retired GP who developed Alzheimer's dementia at a relatively early age. She now lives in a village for people with dementia and has become a powerful advocate for ways in which we can communicate and care better for people living with the condition. You can find more resources on her website gloriousopportunity.org



Dementia affects a person's memory and ability to reason and they have less ability to communicate and may not recognise people or places. They can become confused and upset and not understand what is going on. Inside though, they are the same person. Feelings remain when facts are lost.

Principles on arrival

- Always approach the person from the front
- Never tap them on the back
- Make eye contact
- Smile and introduce yourself and explain why you are there

Principles for conversations

- Do not start with a factual question that involves memory
- Say something positive
- Stick to one subject at a time
- Do not correct them if what they say is not true, instead try to understand the feelings behind it
- Remember, feelings remain when facts are forgotten. The visit will be remembered because of the feelings left behind, not how long or what you did

Suggested conversation starters

Introduce yourself

- ✓ Good morning or hello
- ✓ Lovely to meet you
- ✓ I am (name) and I am here to do...

If anything needs to be moved

- ✓ Is it alright if I... move this?
- ✓ Can I please ask you to move so I can...

Offers of help

- ✓ Shall I make you a cup of tea?
- ✓ Would you like me to...?

Rather than

- ✗ What do you want me to do?
- ✗ Would you like tea/coffee with sugar?
- ✗ You'll have to move if you want me to...

Small talk

- ✓ It's so good to see the sun
- ✓ Well we need the rain for the garden
- ✓ I am glad it is...
- ✓ You have a lovely smile

Rather than

- ✗ Dreadful news on the TV today
- ✗ It's always raining, it's so miserable

- ✓ I remember when...

Rather than

- ✗ Do you remember?