

Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf



*Understanding and supporting people
with dementia in our churches*

Safeguarding guidelines

*for members of clergy, staff and
congregations*

2025

Introduction

The Church has a duty to ensure that everyone who participates in the life of the Church does so in a safe, welcoming and supportive environment.

These guidelines are for everyone in our churches, who may have any contact, however informal, with a person with dementia. They are adapted from the Alzheimer's Society's online publication 'Understanding and supporting a person with dementia'. The adaptations are to make the guidelines generally applicable to everyone in a church context; not specifically to family members and carers.

The original publication and supplementary information can be viewed in full here:

[Understanding and supporting a person with dementia | Alzheimer's Society](#)

More detailed resources are also available online, including on dementia-friendly churches.

Some of these are listed at the end of these guidelines under *Further reading*.

Ways to support someone with dementia

The way a person with dementia feels and experiences life is down to more than just having the condition. Their relationships, environment and support all shape their experience too.

Friends and family can help the person with dementia to feel valued and included.

- Support should be sensitive to the person as an individual.
- Support should also focus on promoting their wellbeing and meeting their needs. It's important to focus on what the person still does have, not on what they may have lost and to concentrate on what the person feels, rather than what they remember.
- The person with dementia may be experiencing a world that is very different to that of the people around them. To understand and support the person, it helps to try and see things from their perspective and recognise their coping strategies.

Responses to dementia

The way a person reacts to dementia will depend on their personality, their previous experiences, their understanding of dementia, the social and emotional support they receive, and their environment. People may adopt different coping strategies at different times.

Some people may not acknowledge that they have dementia. They may deny that they are experiencing difficulties.

Others may be aware that things are becoming harder but feel that is a normal part of ageing rather than part of dementia.

Identity

A person's sense of identity - who they think of themselves as - is shaped by many things, including their relationships and roles in the family and community.

Changes caused by dementia may lead to changes in their sense of identity. It is important that those around them are aware of this because they are able to influence how a person with dementia sees themselves. They should try to treat the person with dementia as an individual rather than defining them by the condition or focusing on negative aspects such as lost abilities.

Changes in behaviour

As their condition progresses, a person with dementia may start to behave in ways that are challenging and distressing, both for themselves and those around them. For example, a person with dementia may:

- become restless or agitated
- shout out or scream
- become suspicious of others
- follow someone around
- ask the same question repeatedly

These out-of-character behaviours can occur because the person has a need that isn't being met and they cannot communicate it. For example:

- they might be thirsty, hungry or in pain
- they may have misunderstood something and feel threatened
- they may be frustrated or bored

Relationships, roles and responsibilities

Relationships form a central part of our identity. Relationships often change when someone has dementia.

People with dementia can easily become isolated or avoided by those around them.

They may lose contact with friends and family, who may not know how to react to them.

The impact of dementia on the individual

Most people living with dementia experience problems with their memory and thinking. This can lead to loss of:

- Self-esteem and confidence
- Social roles and relationships
- The ability to carry out hobbies
- Everyday life skills

However, the person will still keep some of their abilities. They will still feel an emotional connection to people and their environment, even later on in the condition.

Communicating

People with dementia often experience difficulties communicating – for example, problems with finding the right word or following a conversation. Other factors that may affect communication include pain, other conditions, side effects of medication and sensory impairments.

Tips on communication

- If the person finds speech difficult, speak slightly more slowly and use simple words and sentences.
- A person with dementia may use their behaviour and body language to communicate, such as gestures, eye contact and facial expressions.
- Try to maintain eye contact. This will help the person focus on you.
- Try to avoid sudden movements and tense facial expressions, as these may cause upset or distress.
- Try not to stand too close or stand over someone when talking – it may be intimidating.
- Make sure the person is included in conversations.
- Listen to the person. Give them plenty of time. They may be trying to communicate feelings, not just facts.
- Avoid asking too many questions. Consider giving options or asking yes or no questions.

Independence

Where possible, it is important to support the person with dementia to do things for themselves rather than 'taking over'. This increases the person's wellbeing and helps maintain their dignity, confidence and self-esteem.

It is important for the person to be involved as much as possible. This can mean enabling the person with dementia to do things their way, within reason.

Practical tips for supporting someone with memory loss

There are many practical ways we can support a person with dementia who is experiencing memory loss.

1. Forgetting recent conversations or events

People with dementia may find it hard to remember recent conversations and events, even in the early stages.

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.

Ways to help

- Pictures and written descriptions can be useful.
 - Give simple answers to questions and repeat them as often as needed.
 - If the person can't remember whether they have done something or not, try to give context to your question and include prompts.
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As in so many areas, the foundation of good safeguarding lies not in policies and procedures. Mutual respect, trust, support for one other and the creation of a safe, healthy, nurturing environment is at the heart of it.

In the words of Maya Angelou:

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

2. Forgetting names and words

People with dementia may have difficulties finding the right word in a conversation. They may confuse one word for another, or forget the meaning of certain words. They might also forget the names of friends or family members whom they have known for a long time and are close to.

Ways to help

- If the person is struggling to find a word, give them enough time to say what they are trying to say. Feeling under pressure can 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, try to find tactful ways to remind them without highlighting that they have forgotten – for example, ‘Here’s your friend, Elena.’

3. Having difficulties with day-to-day tasks

As dementia progresses, the person will have more difficulties with daily tasks, especially those that involve following a set of steps. They may not remember the order of the steps to follow.

It is important to support them to do as much as possible for themselves, for as long as they can.

4. Getting lost outside the home

A person with dementia may leave the house and forget where they were going or why. They may also have problems recognising familiar environments. Support from others in the community can be helpful.

5. Forgetting upcoming events

People with dementia may forget upcoming events such as medical appointments, visits and anniversaries.

6. Struggling to recognise faces

As the person's dementia progresses, they may have difficulty recognising familiar faces, including their own reflection. Not recognising themselves or the people around them can make them feel as though there are intruders in their home.

Even if the person doesn't seem to recognise those closest to them, they can still have an emotional attachment to those people and feel close to them.

Ways to help

- Try to find tactful ways to give the person cues or reminders without mentioning their memory loss
- 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. Try to focus on how they respond to you in the moment. Even if they don't seem to recognise you, they may still smile at you or want to speak with you.
- Someone with dementia may still be able to recognise people's voices or the way they smell. Hearing a person speak or smelling their perfume or aftershave may help them to recognise that person.

7. Forgetting beliefs

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.

If the person has forgotten aspects of their faith that used to be important to them, think of other aspects of worship they might still enjoy or respond to. For example, they may still enjoy religious music and songs, or take comfort in holding or wearing symbols of their faith.

Further reading

[Becoming a dementia friendly church.pdf](#)

[Dementia-Friendly-Church-Guide.pdf](#)

[Growing dementia-friendly churches – Gaynor Hammond](#)

<https://faithinlaterlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Dementia-friendly-church-checklist-1-1.pdf>



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