

Friendship & dementia

Hints and tips on supporting friends with dementia

My friend's just been told they have dementia

"Sometimes you need to wait for the person with dementia to come to you."

A diagnosis of dementia can turn someone's world upside down. They (or the people closest to them) might have known something was wrong for a while. But hearing the words can change everything.

Friendship becomes more important than ever.

Your friend might have problems with their memory, or become easily disoriented. Some types of dementia can cause problems with vision or language. The person may be upset or even angry after their diagnosis (or refuse to accept it) and could be worried about people treating them differently.

What you can do to help

- 1.** Stay in touch! People with dementia can become isolated very quickly, as friends and family can feel uncomfortable talking about it.
- 2.** Find out more about dementia and how it's likely to affect their everyday life. This will help you to support your friend and make you more prepared for changes in the months and years ahead.
- 3.** It can be very hard to cope with a diagnosis of dementia and people can respond very differently: fear, anger, grief and denial are all common. Be as understanding and patient as you can.
- 4.** Your friend might make mistakes or get mixed up if they have a problem with their memory. Don't take it personally.
- 5.** Don't put pressure on your friend or the friendship to stay exactly the same. Memory problems, increased tiredness, confusion and the stress of adapting to dementia means that your friend will have 'off' days.
- 6.** Support your friend to stay independent as long as possible. You don't need to do everything for them (which is the last thing most people with dementia want), but you can help them to keep doing activities they enjoy. This is particularly important if your friend is no longer able to drive or use public transport unaided.
- 7.** The most important way you can help is just to be a good friend.

My friend has had dementia for some time

“The biggest change came when my friends realised that things can carry on as before; if things get too much I’ll let them know.”

Everyone’s experience with dementia is different. Your friend’s experience will vary depending on the type of dementia they have, how quickly it was diagnosed and many other factors. As the condition progresses, it can also be helpful to talk to your friend’s partner, carer(s), or family about how best to maintain your friendship.

Your friend may need more support day-to-day. They might struggle to remember people’s names or confuse them with others. As the condition progresses, they might need repeated reminders (and help) to do simple tasks.

What you can do to help

- 1.** Staying friends and keeping in regular contact can help maintain a person with dementia’s sense of identity and self-esteem.
- 2.** Using photos, music and other meaningful things to reminisce together, can help your friend remember shared experiences.
- 3.** Accepting the person your friend is now; try not to draw comparisons with how they were before developing dementia.
- 4.** Continue to include your friend in social activities for as long as possible.
- 5.** Make sure to talk directly to your friend, especially in social situations. Don’t talk past them or assume they are not listening or do not understand.
- 6.** Using gentle physical contact, such as linking arms or having a hug, can be very comforting for people with dementia.
- 7.** If your friend is being cared for, try to support the person who provides care for your friend too: it might be their spouse/partner, grown-up children or another relative. Spending time with your friend while their carer can go to the shops or meet their own friends can make a huge difference.

My friend's dementia is very advanced

"If something goes wrong or you don't understand, do not give up. Sometimes I have a heart to heart with my friends. . . It's not always about dementia!"

As your friend's dementia becomes advanced, or if they are approaching the end of life with dementia, you may feel there is very little you can do. However, there are still lots of ways you can be a good friend.

Memory loss may mean the person no longer recognises even the people closest to them or previously treasured possessions. They may become much weaker physically and struggle to eat unassisted or to talk.

What you can do to help

- 1.** Continue to spend time with them; your friend might not be aware that you're there but they still appreciate the human contact – continue to reminisce with the person, even if they can't communicate fully.
- 2.** Support their carer, particularly if your friend is still being cared for at home; a few hours of respite can make all the difference.
- 3.** Be vigilant when spending time with the person; small signals and changes in body language can be a sign of pain or distress. Use your knowledge of the person to identify these signals.
- 4.** Visiting them following a move to a care home or hospital can help your friend to relax in what might be a stressful and frightening situation.
- 5.** Even after your friend has died, their partner/carers and family might appreciate your support, especially your memories of the friendship.

Getting Help

More information and advice are available from our Dementia Helpline and on our website, wherever you live in Scotland.

Dementia Helpline - 0808 808 3000

Our freephone Dementia Helpline is there 24 hours a day, every day, for anyone who needs information or someone to talk to about dementia. Everyone on the Helpline is fully trained and supported by staff at Alzheimer Scotland and has a particular interest in dementia. You can also contact the Helpline by e-mail at helpline@alzscot.org.

You can find out about dementia and the services and activities we offer on our website at www.alzscot.org.

Local Services:

Our specialist dementia services provide personalised support designed around each individual's abilities and interests.

Our day care and day opportunities services give people with dementia a stimulating and sociable environment with a high ratio of staff and volunteers to people with dementia. In many parts of Scotland, people recently diagnosed with dementia can benefit from a minimum of one year's support after their diagnosis from one of our **Dementia Link Workers**.

Our **Dementia Advisors** provide a local point of contact for people with dementia and their families at all stages of their journey, from diagnosis through to end-of-life care. They also support communities to become more dementia-friendly.

Our **community activities**, such as dementia cafes, singing groups, sporting reminiscence groups, walking groups and cinema clubs, are a great way to meet other people, benefit from mutual support and talk to staff about any issues relating to dementia. We support carers and people with dementia with information, support groups, and carer education.

"I remember taking mum to the local shop; people who maybe didn't know her at the start took some time to say hello. It made my mum light up."

Alzheimer Scotland – Action on Dementia is Scotland's leading specialist dementia charity.

We're here when people need someone to listen to them and give emotional support, or when they need practical information and advice. You can meet with our Dementia Advisors or pick up the phone to our 24 hour Freephone Dementia Helpline anytime.

Our clubs, cafes and groups give people a chance to meet others in similar circumstances, make new friends and enjoy the therapeutic benefits of activities and socialising.

We help fund research, including risk reduction and prevention, giving hope to future generations. We also campaign to improve public policies and services for people with dementia and their partners, families and carers.

90,000 people in Scotland are living with dementia and as that number continues to rise, there has never been a more vital time to support the work of Alzheimer Scotland. We need in excess of £105,000 each week to maintain our current work. We can only make a difference to people living with dementia with your help.

You can support our work by:

- donating regularly with a monthly gift, enabling us to plan ahead with confidence
- taking part in our fun events held throughout the year in Scotland, or hold your own event
- becoming a member and adding strength to our campaigning voice
- leaving us a legacy or setting up a tribute fund
- becoming a Dementia Friend - www.dementiafriendsscotland.org.

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