



Friendship & dementia

Hints and tips on supporting
friends with dementia



**Alzheimer
Scotland**
Action on Dementia



**My friend's
just been
told they
have
dementia**

"Friendship can be as simple as a smile to a passing stranger or a quick "hello" to acknowledge someone's presence. For a person living alone, it can be their only link to the outside world, or it can be an ongoing source of pleasure with a group of lifelong soulmates. It can offer a listening ear when someone is troubled, and a helping hand in time of need."

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**

- Stay in touch. People with dementia can become isolated very quickly, as friends and family can feel uncomfortable talking about it.
- Think about the background to the friendship. What draws you together? Use these to further the friendship, through activities and conversation.
- Find out more about dementia and how it's likely to affect your friend's everyday life. This will help you to support them and prepare you for changes in the months and years ahead.
- 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.
- Your friend might make mistakes or get mixed up if they have a problem with their memory. Don't take it personally.
- Don't put pressure on your friend or expect 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.
- 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.
- The most important way you can help is just to be a good friend.



My friend
has had
dementia
for some
time

"Friendship is so important for everyone's mental health. It scares away loneliness, lets you share the good and bad times with someone who understands you, and in return gives you a purpose in your life."

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

- Staying friends and keeping in regular contact can help maintain a person with dementia's sense of identity and self-esteem.
- Use photos, music and other meaningful things to reminisce together, this can help your friend remember shared experiences.
- Choose topics that you think will interest your friend to open up and sustain conversation.
- Accept the person your friend is now; try not to draw comparisons with how they were before developing dementia.
- Continue to include your friend in social activities for as long as possible.
- 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.
- Use gentle physical contact, such as linking arms or having a hug. This can be very comforting for people with dementia.
- If your friend is being cared for, try to support the person who provides that care. It might be their spouse/partner, grown-up children or another relative. Spending time with your friend while their carer goes to the shops or meets their own friends can make a huge difference.
- If you participate in an activity or go on an outing, you may need to 'look out' for your friend and sometimes give direction. For example, when to cross the road or when to get up when you are on the bus.



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**

- Adjust your expectations of their ability to carry out a fully coherent conversation. However, 'islands' of thought and interest 'hold up' so listen and respond to these.
- 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 them, even if they can't communicate fully.
- Support their carer, particularly if your friend is still being cared for at home. A few hours of respite can make all the difference.
- 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.
- Visit your friend following a move to a care home or hospital. This can help them relax in what might be a stressful and frightening situation.

Continuing to be a friend of a person with dementia requires effort and creativity but there is satisfaction in knowing that on some occasions you connect and make a difference to their wellbeing. This is supportive to their family and friends too.

Your friend's partner/carers and family might appreciate your support after they have died, especially sharing the memories of your friendship.

Finding support

Our Dementia Helpline

Our 24 hour Freephone Dementia Helpline provides information, signposting and emotional support to people with the illness, their families, friends and professionals. All our Helpline volunteers are full trained and supported by staff at Alzheimer Scotland and have a particular interest in dementia. You can also contact the Helpline on **0808 808 3000** or by e-mail at helpline@alzscot.org

Our Dementia Advisors

Alzheimer Scotland has a network of skilled Dementia Advisors across Scotland. They can offer you, your family or carer confidential advice and support. They work with local communities to make them more dementia friendly. You can contact our Dementia Advisors on **0300 373 5774** (calls charged at local rate), Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm. Or email advice@alzscot.org

Our Centres

Our Centres are based throughout Scotland and offer friendly, accessible environments for everyone to enjoy. Whether you want to pop in for some information, advice or support, our friendly staff and volunteers will be able to help you. Each Centre is also a base for our wide range of local groups and activities.



"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."



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About Alzheimer Scotland

Alzheimer Scotland is Scotland's national dementia charity. Our aims are Prevent, Care, Cure and our mission is to make sure nobody faces dementia alone. We provide support and information to people with dementia, their carers and families, campaign for their rights and fund vital dementia research. Find out more about our work at **www.alzscot.org**

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