

IS IT DEMENTIA?

RETAIL SERVICES | FACT SHEET

Your role requires you to provide a customer service interaction which supports individuals with their retail requirements. This may be on a daily, weekly or infrequent basis however it is highly likely that people with dementia will be part of your target market. This fact sheet is designed to give you information that may alert you to signs or considerations you can make during the process of your work to support people with dementia.

What is dementia?

Dementia is a term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses which cause a progressive decline in a person's functioning. It is a broad term used to describe a loss of memory, intellect, rationality, social skills and what would be considered normal emotional reactions.

Signs of dementia

In the early stages the symptoms of dementia can be very subtle. However, it often begins with lapses in memory and difficulty in finding the right words for everyday objects. A person with dementia may experience one or more of the following symptoms:

- Forgetting recent events
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty expressing their thoughts
- Confusion in understanding what others are saying
- Confusion about the day, time, where they live, where they have come from, what they have just been doing, or the actual situation they find themselves in
- Difficulty performing more complex tasks
- Difficulty managing finances
- Being anxious, crying or distressed
- Inappropriate behaviour or responses

People with dementia may differ in the patterns and type of problems they have, and the speed with which their abilities deteriorate. Their abilities may change from day to day, or even within the same day. However, what is certain is that the person's abilities will deteriorate, sometimes rapidly over a few months, in other cases more slowly over a number of years.

There are many conditions where people can exhibit signs similar to dementia such as forgetfulness or memory problems. It is best not to assume that someone has dementia just because some of the symptoms are present. Strokes, depression, alcoholism, infections, hormone disorders, nutritional deficiencies and brain tumours can all cause dementia-like symptoms.

Impact of dementia

When a person has dementia their ability to function can be compromised. For example their tolerance to stress may not be as good as it used to be. Being able to deal with uncertainties, crowds, pressure or noisy environments may cause them to become upset, angry or disoriented. Alternatively, a person may start to lose their social inhibitions, such as someone who has always taken pride in their dress, starting to dress carelessly, or doing and saying inappropriate things.

People close to the person with dementia are also affected. The nature of their relationship can change as the person with dementia may come to rely more heavily on them for support, especially family members. In turn the caring role may have an adverse effect on the wellbeing and health of the family members. Remember, when you interact with a member of the family, you may be faced with a very tired and frustrated person who will require gentle support.

Different Types of Dementia

Currently there are over 100 identified types of dementia. There are 5 common types which you will frequently encounter:

1. Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia and will initially have an impact on someone's short term memory. Other changes can be experienced later as the disease progresses and may include communication and mobility difficulties, behavioural changes and eventually, loss of long term memory.
2. Vascular dementia is usually the result of ongoing mini stroke activity (transient ischaemic attacks or TIA's). The impact and presentation will vary depending on where in the brain the stroke activity has occurred.
3. A combination of Alzheimer's disease and Vascular dementia.
4. Lewy body disease is a form of dementia that can result in changes to movement, thinking and behaviour and is increasingly more common.
5. Fronto-temporal dementia where the signs may include significant behavioural and personality changes and loss of inhibition.

It is important to remember that all people present differently with dementia requiring an individualised approach.

Younger Onset Dementia

Dementia doesn't just happen to older people and people in their 30's, 40's and 50's also experience dementia. Whilst less common the incidence is increasing with over 24,000 Australians living with younger onset dementia.

Signs to look out for

A person with dementia is likely to appear confused and disorientated or they may lack insight or be adamant about particular issues. There is no singular presentation as the disease exhibits across a range of domains. However the most common signs are memory loss and confusion. Repetitive questioning or the inability to follow simple instructions may be a first indication that something is 'not quite right' and the way you respond will have an affect on the outcome of the situation. Whilst not all people who present with these signs will have dementia you should take a moment to consider 'is it dementia?' when interacting with customers.

It is important to consider that the person with dementia may not be able to distinguish between uniforms particularly if they have had experiences (negative or positive) with uniformed individuals in the past. Uniforms may signify ambulance, military, police, prison guards or street cleaners instead of retail support. There may be an attempt to rationalise who they are interacting with or use resistive behaviour as they may connect the uniform with previous incidences from their life. It is important to recognise that their response may seem out of context to you but to them it makes sense. (Consideration: what if you had an experience as a prisoner of war – uniforms may make you feel uncomfortable, and in trouble)

Where you have concerns you should always speak with your manager or peer support.

Communication Considerations

Certain behaviours are easier to understand if you suspect or know the person has dementia and these considerations will help you explore situations further. It is important to try not to react to what someone with dementia is saying as they may be unaware of the impact. Of course safety is paramount and your process and protocols should support your own and staff and customers safety – but take a moment to consider if your interaction may be escalating the situation and if you can choose alternative responses.

If possible be 'in the moment' and attempt to connect with the person through acknowledging their experience. This may be challenging within your environment and where practical moving to a quieter location with additional support is a good option, however the following tips for communication may further assist you.

- Genuine and calm reassurance will potentially bring about better outcomes so where possible read the emotion, body language and tone of voice rather than the words used.
- Repeated questions from the person with dementia may be an indicator of increased confusion, stress or fear. The result may be someone asking for something that is not relevant within the current context such as their mother/husband/wife (even if deceased). This usually signifies a need for security and comfort. The response to this should be reassurance and validation of the emotions even when you don't have the full information available.

- Reminiscence and diversion may assist to calm someone down and establish feelings of security. It can help someone to tell you about themselves and their life history and may also assist with distracting from their current point of focus.
- By using someone's name, it reminds them you know who they are and a connection has been established. You may need to continually reintroduce yourself and your purpose for being there and if so, do so calmly and reassuringly with as little frustration as possible. Model these behaviours for others to use.
- Look for signs that may indicate the person has dementia if you do not personally know them, e.g. Medic Alert bracelet, Companion Cards and other identifying materials. Some states have similar identification bracelets to the Medic Alert system which identify that a person has cognitive issues.
- Try not to react to what someone with dementia may be saying. If possible be 'in the moment' and connect with the person through acknowledging the insecurity felt

Consider sharing information if you have repeated incidences within your retail setting. For example, if a customer repeatedly presents within your shop or centre and the same issues continually occur ensure that there is awareness for others who might be interacting with this customer. Flag the issues with your supervisor and consider putting a plan in place to support the interactions into the future.

Consider the impact of environment on people with dementia. People with dementia work well in familiar and consistent environments and even minor changes to routine can cause anxiety and agitation. Your environment may be an additional stressor and anything you can do to support them will provide a positive outcome for both parties.

Consider accessing further specific advice from individual culturally and linguistically diverse or aboriginal communities where these are a further complexity on the issues you are presented with.

Consider developing individual plans for your teams in the future for working with people with dementia – these could include dementia specific pathways.

Consider offering and encouraging fluids (where appropriate) especially if the weather is warm by physically handing the person a drink not just asking (a person with dementia may not think to ask for a drink or understand the question).

Consider that the person with dementia may express further confusion not connected to the current event

- Do not attempt to restrain unless safety issues are immediate (then follow your organisational protocols).
- Be aware of the signs of stress or frustration for a person with dementia (repetitive questioning/wandering/distress).

Continue using the person's name and any names you are able to access such as a son or daughter (for example; "Audrey is pleased we could be here to help you until she gets here").

Consider taking people where you require them to be. Avoid just directing or pointing to where you are referring.

Consider your approach, body language and tone of voice. Keeping in mind that just because you may wear a uniform or a name badge does not mean to person will recognise or will continue to know who or what organisation you belong to. Continuously remind the person where they are and who you are on an ongoing basis if they appear confused.

Consider that if someone within your team appears to have connected with the person with dementia it would be good to consider maintaining that connection until further support arrives.

Final thoughts

Dementia is a terminal disease but it should be considered in the context of how our services support people with a disability. Where and whenever it is possible remember to consider:

- Your approach
- Your body language
- The language and words you use
- Environmental stressors (frantic/busy environments are distressing so move to a quieter area when practical)
- If possible nominate a contact person within your team to support the person with dementia until further help arrives. This may involve calling supervisors for further support
- If a person with dementia is lost and you are unable to contact family members to support them please contact the police who will assist in supporting the person to return home
- Consider developing individual plans for unit or team in the future for working with people with dementia.

Where to from here?

For more information or support please contact the:

National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500

The Helpline can assist you with locating additional supports or resources for your state or territory including:

- Statutory bodies for guardianship issues
- Public advocate
- Advocacy services
- Community support services

Additional information can be sourced at:

www.fightdementia.org.au