

# ASSISTING A RESIDENT LIVING WITH DEMENTIA TO BATHE



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## Assisting a resident living with dementia to bathe

Most people consider bathing a highly private, personal activity. A person can feel uncomfortable and vulnerable when requiring assistance with bathing. At the same time, bathing can be relaxing and enjoyable. A person living with dementia can feel the same way.

This tip sheet offers some background on dementia and strategies to ensure dignity and modesty are kept in mind while providing bathing and spa support to residents living with dementia.

### Dementia

People living with dementia may see the world differently because of sensory changes, having better access to memories from the past than the present, environmental factors or other factors. They may also misperceive things (e.g., mistake a shadow for a person) because they cannot see the object clearly. As the illness progresses, older memories are easier to retrieve than more recent memories.<sup>1</sup> This means people living with dementia may use past memories to help understand their current world. Because of this, care partners may not fully understand or interpret the person's words, actions or gestures immediately.

Remember, the reality of the person living with dementia is authentic to them even if it differs from what you are experiencing. It is important to respect their reality. This might mean going along with a story they are telling you that seems unreal to you.<sup>2</sup>

### Supporting a person to live well with dementia

For people living with dementia to maintain a sense of well-being, they need to live in a supportive social environment, where they are accepted, respected, have meaningful relationships and are supported to grow.

There are many ways to create a supportive environment:

- Get to know the person and show them respect (e.g., greet the person by name, use eye contact, actively communicate with and listen to the person).
- Connect with the person rather than correcting them. Share a moment with the person even if their reality or perception of the moment is different from your own.
- Acknowledge the person's emotions and respond with respect and empathy.
- Work with the person, rather than for the person. Support the person to use their abilities and to have a say in decisions.
- Enable and support the person to do what he or she otherwise would not be able to do. Create opportunities for meaning and purpose.
- Go with the flow by adjusting to the person's needs and desires.
- Honour the daily rhythms and life patterns of the person.<sup>2</sup>

There are also supportive ways to approach and communicate with a person living with dementia:

- Approach a resident from the front, not from the side or rear.
- Always speak to the person at their level and face-to-face.
- Always be aware of the residents' personal space and learn where their comfort area is.
- Even if you have been working with a resident on a daily basis, a person living with dementia may not recognize you. Start off all interactions with a resident by introducing yourself.
- Slowly and calmly explain what you will be doing. You may have to show by actions or repeat what you have already said several times as you go along.
- If a resident is non-verbal, still ask them questions and read their body language. This helps to foster independence and provides an inclusive approach.
- Offer statements instead of open-ended questions.
- Remember that 30% of what we say is verbal and 70% is shown by our body language and residents can be very good at reading this.
- Ask the resident about themselves.
- Ask what their favourite things are, what brings them joy.
- Ask the resident to tell you how they would like something done.
- Encourage independence by assisting the resident to bathe themselves. What they are able to do for themselves may change day to day.

When bathing a resident living with dementia watch for verbal or non-verbal cues that they are enjoying or not enjoying the experience. Pain or discomfort could be shown through frowning, grimacing, rigidity, tense posture, holding their breath or a constant shifting of the body. If a resident is uncomfortable with the activity of bathing it is important to be aware of the resident's level of anxiety surrounding the activity. If you learn something new about the resident, share what works with others so it can be added to their care plan.

## Bathing

Here are some tips for a safe and pleasant bathing experience for a resident living with dementia:

- Create a relaxed atmosphere with soft lighting, music, warm room temperature and warm towels
- Before you start, using statements ask what they like best about a bath (warm or hot water, bubbles or no bubbles etc.).
- Respect the need for modesty: allow the resident to bathe in underwear, a bathing suit or wrapped in a towel.
- Carry on a conversation while you are preparing for the bath.
- Lay a towel or a strip of coloured tape on the tub to distinguish the edge.
- Make sure the resident's hands are occupied by providing a wash cloth.
- Consider leaving in a hearing aid or leaving on glasses. You will need to be careful not to get water in a hearing aid, and will have to remove it if you are washing the resident's hair. To help, keep the resident busy with washing and then take out the hearing aid when it is time.

- If a resident is non-verbal, they may use actions to indicate something isn't quite right (i.e. if the water is too cold or too hot, they may swing their arms or call out and may not be able to tell you something is wrong – look for the root cause behind all actions). Stop if the resident has had enough.
- If the resident regularly refuses to take a bath, escort him to the bathroom before raising the subject.
- Arrange to have another individual, with whom the person with dementia is comfortable, help with bathing. Talk to other caregivers who have faced the same challenge.

## Acknowledgements

LIVING the Dementia Journey (LDJ) is an award-winning, evidence-informed training program for those who support people living with dementia. Participants gain awareness and understanding that changes not only the way they view dementia, but the way they support people living with it. LDJ was created by the Murray Alzheimer Research and Education Program in collaboration with people living with dementia and their care partners. For more information about LDJ visit [the-ria.ca/resources/living-the-dementia-journey/](http://the-ria.ca/resources/living-the-dementia-journey/)

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To learn more about person-centred care, visit [the-ria.ca/resources/working-together-to-put-living-first/](http://the-ria.ca/resources/working-together-to-put-living-first/)

## References

1. Power, G.A. (2010). Dementia beyond drugs: Changing the culture of care. Baltimore, Maryland: Health Processions Press, Inc.
2. Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging. (2017). LIVING the Dementia Journey: Fostering Community through Authentic Care Partnerships.
3. Alzheimer's Society Canada. (2017) Bathing. Retrieved from <https://alzheimer.ca/en/Home/Living-with-dementia/Day-to-day-living/Personal-care/Bathing>



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