

# How to help people with dementia

A guide for  
customer-facing staff

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# Introduction

You are one of the many thousands of people in the UK who provide a service to customers as part or all of your job. Some of your customers will be people with dementia. This booklet will provide you with some guidance on how you can help to support them.

An Alzheimer's Society survey revealed that 69 per cent of people with dementia said that the main reason they stop going out is a lack of confidence. Your encouragement and support will help people living with dementia to remain part of the community, be more active in the local area and live better, more fulfilled lives.

By understanding more about dementia and how it can affect individuals, you can also help other people appreciate the impact of this condition. You can contribute to the important work being done to create dementia-friendly communities.

# Your role

By developing an understanding of dementia, you could make someone who is feeling isolated feel valued and welcome.

You are in a position where you can influence the experience of a person with dementia in their local area. Thoughtful and helpful service from you could make a big difference to someone who is feeling vulnerable. You could also directly help somebody in difficulty or a situation that is uncomfortable for them or others.

People experience dementia in different ways and they can be affected differently by the people and environment around them.

In the UK there are 800,000 people living with dementia. They – along with their carers, friends and family members – depend on a wide range of products and services. They are looking for organisations that show support and understanding for people with dementia.

**Please don't underestimate how important your knowledge and understanding might be.**

# Your community

As part of a survey carried out in 2013, people with dementia indicated that the following activities were important to them to achieve either independently or with a carer:

- being able to travel
- going to shops
- running errands
- visiting places of worship
- managing day-to-day tasks.

People with dementia have said that more care and support would enable them to do more in their local area. Being able to undertake the everyday tasks and activities that we take for granted can make people with dementia feel a sense of achievement.

**We can all play a part in enabling people with dementia to live well wherever they are.** It is possible for people with dementia to achieve the outcomes that are important to them whether it is getting a bus into town, using library services or picking up some shopping. With a little help and understanding about dementia and its effects from everyone in the community these aspirations will become a reality for many more people.

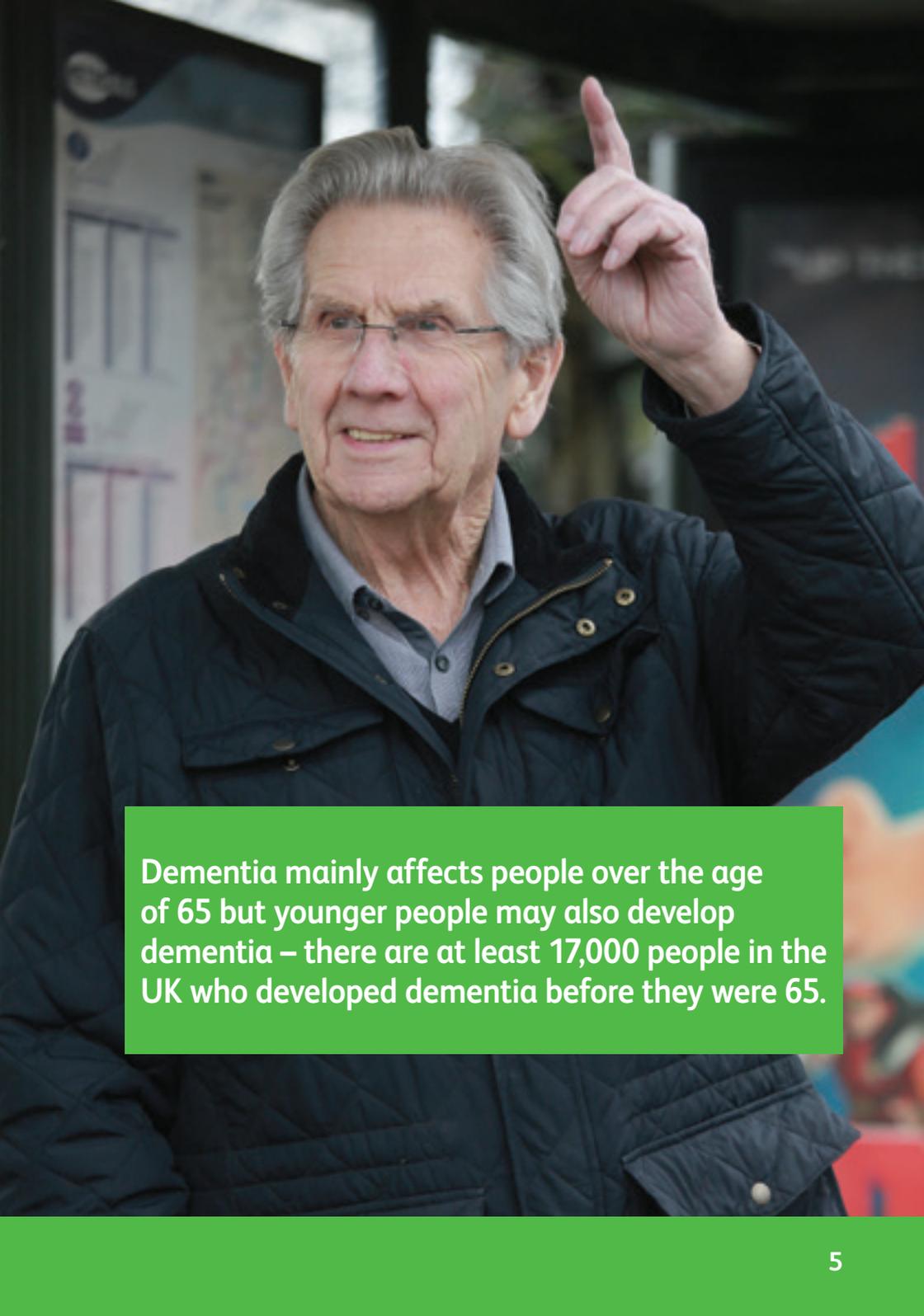
# What is dementia?

The word dementia describes a set of symptoms that include memory loss and difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language.

A person with dementia may also experience changes in their mood or behaviour. There are many types of dementia. The most common are Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.

Dementia is caused by diseases of the brain – it's not an inevitable part of ageing, as many people believe. The symptoms will gradually get worse as it progresses and there is no cure. No two people experience dementia in the same way – it affects everyone differently. You will find some common symptoms listed on page 7.

Dementia mainly affects people over the age of 65 but younger people may also develop dementia – there are at least 17,000 people in the UK who developed dementia before they were 65. The real number may be up to three times higher.



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# How do I know if someone has dementia?

There are no obvious physical signs that show someone has dementia. Another difficulty is that more than half of people who have dementia have not received a diagnosis.

The common symptoms of dementia such as memory loss, confusion, problems with expression, thinking and reasoning might affect the actions of somebody with dementia or the way in which they interact with other people.

Someone accompanying a person with dementia – such as a partner, companion or carer – may indicate to you that the person they are with has dementia. If they do, try to continue to involve the person with dementia directly in the conversation, rather than only focusing on the person they are with.

Some people may carry a helpcard that gives information on what kind of help they might need. You may also find that some people refer to ‘memory problems’ rather than using the word dementia.

# How does dementia affect people?

**Every person with dementia is different** and an individual with their own personality. Some of the ways in which dementia can affect people include:

- **Memory loss** – this particularly affects day-to-day memory, for example forgetting what happened earlier in the day, not being able to recall the reason for being in a particular shop, being repetitive or forgetting addresses. Some people remember things from a long time ago much more easily.
- **Communication problems** – including problems finding the right words for things, for example describing the function of an item instead of naming it. People might also struggle to follow a conversation.
- **Difficulties with thinking things through and planning** – problems with carrying out everyday tasks such as handling money.
- **Confusion about time or place** – not recognising or getting lost in familiar places or being unaware of the time or date.
- **Sight and vision problems** – increased difficulty with reading and judging distances or mistaking shiny, patterned objects or reflections.
- **Unusual emotional behaviour or responses** – becoming sad, angry, frightened or upset. Someone may seem to lack self-confidence or display changes in mood.
- **Restlessness or disorientation** – in unfamiliar or noisy environments people with dementia may become confused or ill at ease.



# How you can help

Dementia is one of a number of reasons why someone might have any of these difficulties. Whatever the cause, **you can play an important role in helping someone contribute to everyday life and feel part of their community.**

If you notice someone having problems such as those described above it is important that first and foremost you see the person as an individual – not just the symptoms of dementia.

You already know the importance of good customer service. The following tips may help you assist someone who is experiencing some of the difficulties associated with dementia.

## **Offer understanding and reassurance**

Someone with dementia who is finding it difficult to process information or is feeling disorientated may not be able to answer simple questions or take in what you are saying. They may not remember what they were doing or intending to do. In the later stages, they may also make mistakes about things, for example they may think that their bag has been stolen when they have left it somewhere else.

When you are assisting a person with dementia, remember the following points.

- Firstly, allow the person to take their time.
- Try to understand how they might be feeling.
- Put the person at ease – be friendly and smile.
- Consider their feelings and respond to the emotions they are expressing.
- If they are experiencing difficulty or appear distressed, **ask direct questions such as whether there is someone they would like you to call, rather than ‘What would you like me to do?’**

## Communicate clearly

The key to helping someone is being able to communicate with them. A person with dementia may not understand what you are doing or remember what you have said. Treat them respectfully by addressing them in conversation as well as any partner or carer they may be with. Follow the guidelines below that may help you communicate with someone who is experiencing difficulties associated with dementia.

### Body language and physical contact

- Make eye contact
- Make sure that your body language and facial expressions match what you are saying.
- Never stand too close or stand over someone to communicate.
- Do not cover your mouth. The person should be able to see your face clearly.

## Talking

- Speak clearly and calmly.
- Use short, simple sentences.
- Speak at a slightly slower pace.
- Avoid speaking sharply or raising your voice.
- Don't talk about people with dementia as if they are not there or talk to them as you would to a young child.

## Listening

- Listen carefully to what the person is saying, and give them plenty of encouragement.
- If you haven't understood fully, tell the person what you have understood and check with them to see if you are right.

If possible, use visual clues – write your message down if the person is able to read and use objects or pictures to help the person understand. For example, show the person photographs of meals they can choose from.

**A person with dementia may not understand what you are doing or remember what you have said. Treat them respectfully by addressing them in conversation as well as any partner or carer they may be with.**

## Be aware of the environment

There may not be very much you can do to change the features of your working environment. However, if you are aware of how these affect people with dementia, you might be able to help if they are having difficulties.

If the place where you work is noisy, busy or there are sounds that might be distracting, this can make people with dementia uneasy. Some people can also have specific visual problems in addition to the normal ageing processes that can affect how clearly they can see.

They may not recognise colours, faces or objects or have problems with spatial awareness (judging the distance between things and where you are in relation to them). This can lead to getting lost or disorientated or bumping into things. Bear in mind the following points:

- Objects that are shiny, patterned or reflective can cause people with dementia to mistake what they are seeing.
- Features such as lighting, mirrors, shadows, steps and patterned walls and floors might cause problems for some people with dementia.
- If someone with dementia has increased difficulty with reading or processing visual information they may not recognise instructions or signs, be able to read maps or timetables, or know where they should put things. What is obvious to you may not be so to them.
- There may be a wide variety of noises in your workplace such as alarms, electronic equipment, music and other voices – be aware of how this might affect someone.





# Offer practical support

In some situations there are specific ways you can provide help to people with dementia. You may find the following suggestions useful:

- If someone can't remember how to do something, offer to show them how to do it. As much as possible, do the task **with** them not **for** them.
- Somebody with dementia may feel anxious about their ability to carry out tasks or activities. Try not to put them under pressure: break down tasks into smaller tasks, supporting them along the way.
- If someone appears to be looking for something they can't find, ask if you can help.
- People with dementia may have problems with money or their payment card. Try to be patient: tell them there's no hurry; ask if you can help counting out the right money.
- If someone cannot remember significant information, for example their address or PIN, make sure you are aware of your organisation's alternative procedures that will help them access the service or information they require (eg being able to sign for purchases). If your organisation doesn't have these processes in place perhaps you could suggest developing them (eg a 'no hurry check-out').
- If someone forgets what you have just said, repeat your sentence patiently as if you had not said it before.
- Be aware of environments that are noisy or dark, and if you can, provide a quiet place where it is easier to offer one-to-one assistance.

If you suspect someone is having difficulties or recognise that a regular customer is having specific problems associated with dementia, be guided by them as to how you can answer their needs.

Dementia affects everyone differently so you may be able to suggest adjustments or put relevant practices in place for individual people with particular requirements. A small action may make a significant difference to someone and help them to continue living safely and comfortably in the community.

## Dealing with a difficult situation

Customer service can sometimes be demanding and stressful. Practise your techniques for coping when your role is challenging and you are helping someone with dementia who is experiencing difficulties. Remember the following tips:

- 1 Stay calm.
- 2 Keep your breathing even.
- 3 Reassure the person with dementia or anyone with them that they are not under any pressure.
- 4 Explain to anyone else concerned that the situation is under control and that it will be resolved as soon as possible.
- 5 If the situation remains difficult, ask a colleague or supervisor for assistance.

# Going to the local

Dad really enjoyed going out to eat at the local pub – somewhere we'd been going for years. As his Alzheimer's disease progressed, his behaviour got more unusual. He didn't understand the menu options, started to complain about the food and would sometimes get very angry for reasons we could not understand.

Mum and I felt so embarrassed that we thought we'd have to stop going to the pub – which Dad would have hated! But two girls who worked there had such a gentle and responsive way of dealing with Dad that his outbursts and confusion never became an issue.

If he complained about the food, they were sympathetic and asked if he'd like a replacement. If he asked for a strange dish (raw onions and tomatoes for instance) then they would bring it for him (checking subtly with us first). If he said, 'Steak, egg and chips! Who on Earth would come up with such a ridiculous combination?!', they would tell him they thought it was silly too.

Their kindness and consideration meant that we all felt welcome, and Dad was able to enjoy going out for pub grub – something that really mattered to him – for as long as possible.

**Jamie Anderson, son of Gerry Anderson,  
creator of Thunderbirds**

# Next steps

Encourage your employers and friends to think about what life might be like for people with dementia. Talk to them about being aware of the symptoms of dementia and how a little support and understanding can make it possible for people to live well with dementia. You can find out more about the disease by visiting [alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk) or calling the **Alzheimer's Society National Dementia Helpline** on **0300 222 1122**

## Dementia-friendly communities

Alzheimer's Society is working with many other organisations to create dementia-friendly communities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Many different types of businesses are identifying ways to change the way we think and talk about dementia.

An important part of this work is the national initiative **Dementia Friends**. Join in this movement to demonstrate your commitment to improving understanding and making life better for people with dementia by visiting [www.dementiafriends.org.uk](http://www.dementiafriends.org.uk). Here, you can find out about all the ways of getting involved including our information sessions or training to become a Dementia Friends Champion.

We hope that you have found this booklet useful and informative. Please help us to work towards creating communities where people with dementia can continue to live well. Make your workplace dementia friendly by showing understanding and help make a huge difference to someone in need.







Alzheimer's Society is the UK's leading support and research charity for people with dementia, their families and carers. We provide information and support to people with any form of dementia and their carers through our publications, National Dementia Helpline, website, and more than 2,000 local services. We campaign for better quality of life for people with dementia and greater understanding of dementia. We also fund an innovative programme of medical and social research into the cause, cure and prevention of dementia and the care people receive.

To find out more about Alzheimer's disease or any other form of dementia, visit [alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk) or call the **Alzheimer's Society National Dementia Helpline** on **0300 222 1122**.

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