



Hints and tips for customer-facing staff

Making Walsall a dementia-friendly borough



Walsall Clinical Commissioning Group



Walsall Council

Briefing note

How to help customers with memory problems

This briefing note is designed to help you support customers who might have dementia.

What is dementia?

Dementia currently affects some 800,000 people in the UK.

There are many forms of dementia, but they are all diseases of the brain which can cause:

- Problems with memory
- Problems with everyday tasks, like handling money
- Problems with communication
- Problems with perception.

It is progressive, in that it starts off with very mild symptoms and gets worse over time.

It affects everyone differently. No two people with dementia are the same.

Why do I need to know this?

Lots of your customers may already have dementia.

Certainly, lots more of your customers will be developing dementia and will want to carry on using your business.

This help-sheet has been written to give you some very basic information that can help you to provide a great service to people with dementia.

What are people with dementia like?

Everyone experiences dementia in different ways, and no two people are the same.

What is a problem for one person, may not be for another and visa-versa.

The image of a person with dementia you might have in your head is perhaps that of someone who is:

- Very confused
- Needs a lot of help
- Lives in a care home
- Can't communicate

- Cannot control themselves.

If you have this image in your head, it would not be surprising as that is the way people with dementia are often portrayed in the media. Here are a few famous people who have or have had dementia: Margaret Thatcher, Winston Churchill and Norman Wisdom.

Most people with dementia you will encounter will not resemble this stereotype at all. They are more likely to have much less pronounced difficulties, living independently, getting out and about, using shops and cafés, doing the same kind of things we all do.

...but they may just need a little more help to carry on doing these things as time goes by.

How can I spot a person with dementia?

You can't.

Most people with dementia are over 65, but some are younger.

Some people with dementia will tell you if they are having problems and how you can help.

Some people carry a card which explains the problems they have and how you might help. There may be a "memory-aware" scheme in your area through which people with dementia can carry a card which explains how you can best help them. You might also notice customers doing or saying things which suggest that they are having problems that might be caused by dementia.

These include:

- Looking or saying that they are a bit lost or confused.
- They might appear to be searching for something they can't find
- They might be looking like they don't know what to do next
- They might appear to have problems making and remembering appointments
- They might be finding self-service facilities hard to understand
- Understanding written information
- Their speech might be hard to understand
- They might appear to have problems understanding what you are saying.

Of course, there are all sorts of reason why people might be having these problems that are nothing to do with dementia or memory problems.

Generally speaking, the younger the person appears to be the less likely it is to be dementia-related. But remember, younger people can have dementia too.

What can I do to help?

If you have good "people skills" and work for a business with a good culture of customer care, you already have much of what you need to provide a great service to people with dementia.

Kindness, common sense, avoiding stress, using good communication skills and a smile go a very long way. Let's look at what we can do to help if you see people having these kinds of problems.

What can I do if people are:

- Looking or saying that they are a bit lost or confused?
- Appearing to be searching for something they can't find?
- Looking like they don't know what to do next?

DO: Approach them in a friendly open manner, and ask "can I help?"

It really is that simple and for many people with dementia, this will be all they need and will be able to explain exactly how you can help.

DON'T: Call to them from a distance.

Many people with dementia have also got hearing problems or might have difficulty locating where the voice is coming from. It is also much less friendly than approaching someone directly.

What can I do if people are:

- Struggling to find their way around
- Appearing to find self-service facilities hard to understand.

Again, simply asking if you can help can go a long way.

Also, DO:

- Tell them to take their time – there's no hurry
- Offer to run the items through self-service or show them how to do it
- Offer assistance to locate room
- Explain things as many times as necessary.

DON'T:

- Attempt to hurry them.
- Let any impatience show, especially in the form of raised eyebrows, "tutting", or exchanging knowing looks with other customers or staff.

What can I do if people are hard to understand?

Some people with dementia develop problems with their speech and these can be made worse if they feel stressed or hurried.

DO:

- Encourage them to take their time
- Listen very carefully and make sure that you are communicating through your body language that you are listening and focused on them
- Be conscious of their body language
- If you still don't understand – then take a best guess and say something along the lines of "I'm finding it hard to understand you – are you saying...?"
- If this doesn't work, then ask them to point at what they want
- Some people are still able to write – so ask them if they can write it down.



What can I do if they appear to have problems understanding what I am saying?

Some people with dementia can develop problems with understanding what is said to them, especially if they feel stressed or hurried or if there is a lot of background noise and distractions:

DO:

- Take your time – speak clearly and not too quickly
- Try to make only one point at a time
- Say things more simply if you need to
- Make sure you are at the same level as the person and use good eye contact
- Try saying things another way
- Use sign language and gestures to reinforce what you are saying, this can be a big help.

What if I none of this works and I need help?

One approach is to ask the person if they would like to take a rest or sit-down somewhere quiet, so long as you have that facility available. Quite often, after a break, people feel much better and are able to function more effectively.

Ask the person if there is anyone you can contact who might be able to help. If so, then call them.

If none of this works and the person appears to need help, then you should call for your manager for help.

If you are the manager, or are working alone, then depending upon the nature of your business and location you could call:

- Pathways 4 Life on 01922 707 898 or the Alzheimers Society on 0121 521 3020
- Your community police officer, you should have their number on hand
- Social services outreach
- If the person appears to be at risk, then the emergency services as a last resort.

Where can I get more information?

If you want to find out more about dementia, see the document in the toolkit “awareness-raising for staff” or visit:

accordgroup.org.uk

ageuk.org.uk

alzheimers.org.uk



Sunflower adapted from a photograph by Flickr user 'Being There' of Wheeling, Illinois, USA



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