

Providing personal care for a person living with dementia



Assisting someone with their personal care, whether it be bathing, showering, continence care and/or promoting good oral hygiene can be a very private and complex activity. There can be many steps involved where challenges may appear.

Having someone assist in such a private and personal processes can be intimidating for anyone, but for a person living with dementia it can be especially daunting. If not approached sensitively, it may cause the person to feel the need to defend themselves, leading others to describe the person as, for example, “verbally and physically aggressive”.

There can be many reasons why a person might decline assistance with personal care. These include their personal values, culture, mental state, and past experiences. Taking account of these factors in planning personal care activities can increase the likelihood of a positive personal care experience.

A person living with dementia needs to be consulted when others attend to their care needs. At times a person may not see the need for the activity, or believe that they can do the task independently (not realising how much support they actually need). This can pose a challenge for the carer, so developing approaches that include the person in the process makes sense for everyone.

This Helpsheet is one of a series of short guides produced by Dementia Support Australia focusing on a specific aspect of caring for a person with dementia.

Visit dementia.com.au to see the full series.

The following approaches may be beneficial:

1. Unless you know that the person is comfortable with receiving help, do not imply or state that you need to help the person, as this can cause embarrassment. Instead, you may wish to ask the person “can you help me pick out an outfit that you want to wear today?”
2. Provide a purpose and context to an activity, for example, “There is a concert on today. Would you like to wear a new outfit?”
3. Context can also be provided by the presence of environmental cues. For example, prepare the room before engaging the person. Ensure the bedroom or bathroom is warm and welcoming, lay out toiletries etc. This can help the person familiarise the person and help them feel comfortable with the planned activity.
4. At times, despite the carers best efforts, the person might still decline assistance. It is important to respect their choice and to not challenge their reasons as to why they don’t want to engage at that time. You can always approach the person at another time.

How to plan for personal care?

When creating a care plan to support a person living with dementia in the provision of personal care activities the following aspects should be considered:

1. Know the person

It is important to obtain as much information as possible about the person and their preferences. Consider asking the person or a family/friend about the person’s routine. For example;

- Do they prefer a hot or warm shower?
- Do they prefer a shower early morning or in the evening?
- Do they shower every day?
- Do they use soap or body wash?
- Do they like perfume/deodorant?
- Do they have a bath or shower?
- Do they use a bidet?

In addition to this, it is important to also assess the person’s ability to participate in the care activity. Wherever possible, a person should be given the chance to be as independent as they can. This may include

giving a person a wash cloth to wash their face while the carer washes other areas of the body that the person can no longer reach.

2. Build rapport

Often being exposed in front of another person that you are not familiar with can be a daunting experience. As a carer it is important to ensure that the person requiring support feels as comfortable as possible.

If the person resides in a residential aged care home, knowing the person and building rapport is very important for staff. Prior to engaging a person living with dementia to have a shower, for example, have a short conversation (not related to hygiene) to help build trust and rapport with the person.

Provide consistent carers to undertake personal care when possible, so that over time a person with dementia can learn that a familiar face is coming to help them. Although the person with dementia might not remember the carer or the task, they hopefully will associate the care provision with a positive experience.

3. Consider clinical factors

Common factors that have been identified that may cause “resistiveness” to care include:

- Underlying pain, e.g. the person may have pain in their shoulders that is exacerbated when taking their clothes off
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Sensory changes e.g. reduced vision can make the bathroom appear dark and a confusing place or reduced hearing can result in confusion and frustration as the person might not be able to hear what is being said. Sensitivity to touch might change and so water pressure in showers might have to be adjusted. Towel drying might be uncomfortable.
- Skin excoriations/wounds
- Mobility impairments

The presence of such factors should be assessed regularly, and care activities modified to suit the current needs of the person.

4. Environment

Depending on the person’s unique experience of dementia, the bathroom can be a disabling environment. Mirrors, for example, can be problematic, with some people perceiving their reflection as another person being in the room with them.

Older adults have greater difficulty maintaining their body temperature (meaning that older people are more likely to feel the cold). It is important to assess whether the bathroom is warm enough before taking someone into that space. Attention to both the environment and individual sensory changes can improve the personal care experience for everyone.

How to approach the person for personal care

As no two people are the same, each person will have their own preferences for personal care tasks. The following strategies can assist:

- To help with orientation, when entering someone’s room in the morning, softly open the blinds and allow the person to “naturally wake up.” Once the person is awake then approach to have a short chat. “It’s a beautiful day today! I was wondering if you would like to get ready for the day?”
- Break down tasks into simple steps, and gently explain each step – use simple, respectful language.
- If there is more than one carer attending care activities, it is suggested that one carer at a time approach the person living with dementia. One carer may “explain” the tasks at hand, whilst the other carer completes the activity.
- Without rushing the person, ensure that the room is set up and items are easily accessible. Consider input from an occupational therapist to assess ways to improve the environment for the person with dementia. This may include contrasted toilet seats, rails, shower chairs/commodes and non-slip mats.
- If the person with dementia prefers an early shower, consider preparing the room the night before.

How to approach the person for personal care (continued)

- Where possible allow the person to “help” with the care activities, this can be done by, for example:
 - When the person is in the bathroom prompt the person to assist by asking the person to remove their clothes
 - Handing a brush to brush hair or teeth
 - Turning on a shaver
 - Provide a flannel to the person and ask the person to assist by using the flannel to wash their face
 - Giving the person choice of whether they prefer the water warmer or cooler
 - Asking to hold items to give to the carer
- Always ensure that a person’s modesty is considered. Consider having the bathroom door closed, using a dignity cape and/or placing a towel to cover areas of the body.
- Music can have positive effects on mood, and can be used prior to a carer conducting care activities and/or during these activities to help create a positive environment. It is important to use an individualised approach to music engagement for the person (see DSA’s guidelines on The Use of Music Engagement in Dementia Care).

What happens if they still say “no”?

- Don’t panic
- Discuss their reasons for declining care
- Respect the person’s choice
- Offer them the opportunity to eat or drink something first
- Re-approach the task at another later time

What to do if the person experiences stress or distress and/or is aggressive during care tasks

A person living with dementia might be described as becoming aggressive during personal care activities for many reasons. Often, this is because they do not want to proceed and it is their way of communicating “stop” or “this is not what I like, or am used to”.

- If a carer experiences an aggressive response it is important to remain calm, step back and create a safe distance between themselves and the person living with dementia
- Assure the person they are “safe” and validate their response. “I’m sorry if I have upset you...”. Consider assessing at this point such things as pain, water temperature, noise etc
- It is important not to proceed until the person is calm
- At times it may be necessary to change the carer who provides assistance, as this may reduce further frustration

What to avoid?

- Appearing suddenly into the person’s room, turning the lights on and making lots of noise
- Forcing the person to proceed with personal care
- Making choices for the person
- Rushing the person or the task

Useful resources

My home, My Life: Practical ideas for people with dementia and carers is an insightful publication that brings together the voice of people with dementia and carers with the best learning from research and care experience to provide tips, strategies and real-life stories to support greater independence.

Dementia and Sensory Challenges – Dementia can be more than memory provides useful insights from Agnes Houston, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and noticed challenges with her senses. She discusses how to live a positive life despite these changes.

Understanding Psychosocial Approaches: Validation is a helpful guide by Dementia Support Australia on the use of validation in dementia care to communicate an understanding of the emotional state of people with dementia.

Continence and using the toilet is a helpful guide by Dementia Support Australia providing tips and ideas to support carers to assist a person with dementia who has difficulty in using the toilet as the illness progresses.

Understanding pain and its impact in dementia provides an overview of dementia and the pain experience, helping to identify and manage pain in dementia patients.