

MEMORY LOSS

Our memory helps us build and maintain our identity. It tells us who we are, the experiences we have lived, the friends and family we have, and the knowledge we have accumulated over the years. At its most basic level, it tells us whether we are in a familiar safe place or whether we need to be afraid.

Memory loss is a distressing part of dementia, not only for the person with the disease, but also for the caregiver. Loss of memory is one of the earliest signs of Alzheimer's disease and affects almost every aspect of daily life. The brain damage caused by dementia interferes with remembering recent events, finding objects, recalling names and faces, and communicating successfully.

Most people with Alzheimer's disease remember the distant past more clearly than recent events. However, with time, even these long term memories will eventually fade. Speech may become slower because the person has difficulty finding words or because they are unable to maintain a train of thought. In the more advanced stages of the disease, some people with dementia revert back to their native tongue.

By helping the person find strategies to cope with their memory problems, you're helping them remain confident and independent for as long as possible.

Alzheimer Society of BC Provincial Office

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Memory tips

Be patient. Allow plenty of time to process information and answer questions. If the person seems stuck for a word, gently prompt them. Try to do things with, rather than for, the person. Offer help tactfully. Give plenty of encouragement.

Routine is key. Try to establish consistent routines in the early stages of dementia when the person's memory is still relatively intact. Always store things in the same place. Give gentle reminders of the time and day and what you are going to do next.

Use gentle instruction. Model what you want the person to do. Particularly as the disease progresses, use actions and body language to convey what you are saying. Break instructions down into small, simple steps. Allow the person to do as much as they can by themselves, stepping in to offer assistance when you see them becoming frustrated or tired. Always try to focus on what the person can do rather than what they cannot.

Reduce clutter. Keep countertops, tables, and work surfaces clear and organized to help minimize distraction. Lock away valuables and important papers. Have duplicates of essential items such as eyeglasses, keys, and toothbrushes. Attach keys or wallets to a belt so they are not easily misplaced.

Offer help. If the person becomes distressed over a lost item, offer to help search for it. If the person is compulsively searching for a non-existent item, try to distract them with an activity or a different object. Encourage the person to continue to communicate verbally when language becomes more difficult for them.

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Respect the person's reality. If the person is insisting that it is 1942 and they are waiting for their mother to take them to school, play along as long as it is safe to do so. Share memories by looking at photographs and souvenirs together.

Memory Aids

- Label cupboards, drawers, water faucets, and doors. Replace words with pictures if the person can no longer read.
- Use pillboxes with compartments for days of the week and time of day. Most pharmacies offer bubble-pack options. Specialized pillboxes only allow access to a particular compartment at the appropriate time.
- Keep a daily calendar with the day's routine clearly written down and any special appointments listed.
- Post reminders throughout the house to prompt the person in their daily routine (for example, in the bathroom: flush, wash hands).
- Take photographs of the usual placement of objects in a room if the person becomes distressed when things are out of place.
- Have the person carry an identity card in their pocket at all times that states their name, address, and emergency contact numbers.

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