



A FAMILY
RESOURCE

How Understanding Memory can Enhance Visits

Learn about memory and 5 tools you can use to connect and communicate with a loved one with dementia.



INTRODUCTION

Memory is complex. And for dementia residents, as memory deteriorates, conversation becomes increasingly challenging.

But understanding their relationship to memory can make communication far more enjoyable for them and for you.

People with dementia feel more comfortable in conversations and activities that ignite their long-term memories with major emotional significance, such as weddings and births. They also respond well to procedural memories — activities and behaviors they've done habitually, like brushing teeth, sorting things, or singing favorite songs.

PROCEDURAL MEMORY

Procedural memory involves activities that you learn and then do automatically without having to think. You use procedural memory to complete a sequence of actions in a particular

order – such as tying shoelaces or swimming. You rely on this type of memory when you adopt new habits. For the person with dementia, this might include learning to use new memory aids.

LONG-TERM MEMORY

Long-term memory includes episodes from past events – recent or distant that hold significant emotional resonance. You use long-term memory when you remember personal experiences, such as what you had for lunch or when you attended a family gathering. These memories often recall significant emotions or feelings.

5 TOOLS TO USE AT VISITS

Here are 5 tools to ensure communication with a resident activates both procedural and long-term memory.

1. Photos

We recommend that every resident with memory issues have a simple 3-ring notebook with up to 10 pages of plastic page protectors, with one labeled picture per page. These pictures should recall past, happy times in their life. By slowly going through each picture, page by page, and describing what it means, you can often engage with your loved one, without them having to talk.

2. Music

Music is a powerful link to the past. It can elicit emotions and memories and promote interconnection with caregivers and others with dementia. Listening with them to music they loved from the time they were 15-25 years old, will tap into their long-term memory, reduce stress, and bring comfort.

3. Body Language and Gestures

When approaching people with dementia, remember they tend to unconsciously reflect your facial expressions and body language. If you smile, they may be more receptive. If you appear relaxed, they may relax. Your initial approach sets the stage for the rest of your visit. Once you have been recognized or accepted, simply holding hands might improve engagement. If you think the resident is still showing any signs of anxiety or discomfort with your visit, research suggests a brief hand massage with lotion may induce mutual comfort and relaxation.

4. Have a fail/safe “go to” remembrance to restore a communication link

Even in late stages of dementia, some memories are maintained. Often, these memories are associated with significant emotional

experiences such as weddings, births, and deaths. Through trial and error and careful listening, identify one or two “go to” subjects which engage the resident.

Frequently, pictures, picture albums or decorative items in the room may also allow the person with dementia to reconnect with you. Saying “Do you remember how hard it rained at your wedding?” or showing a picture of a wedding and saying “this is you at your wedding” or singing the wedding song might enable you to reconnect a conversational thread after a distraction.

5. Simple touch

Gentle touch is often the most effective means of communication in late stage dementia. The simple placing of your hand in theirs can convey love and caring that words could not define.

Please recognize that your visit has made a difference in the life of someone who otherwise spends most of their days in confusion and on borderline stress. Your visit provides an oasis of comfort in a sea of confusion.



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www.avilainstitute.org/family-resources.**

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