

Dementia Awareness Week May 14-20

Tips for people who care for someone with dementia

For Dementia Awareness Week, May 14-20, Ellie Cant shares how The Salvation Army Furze Hill House helps residents live life to the full and offers some ideas for people caring for someone with dementia.

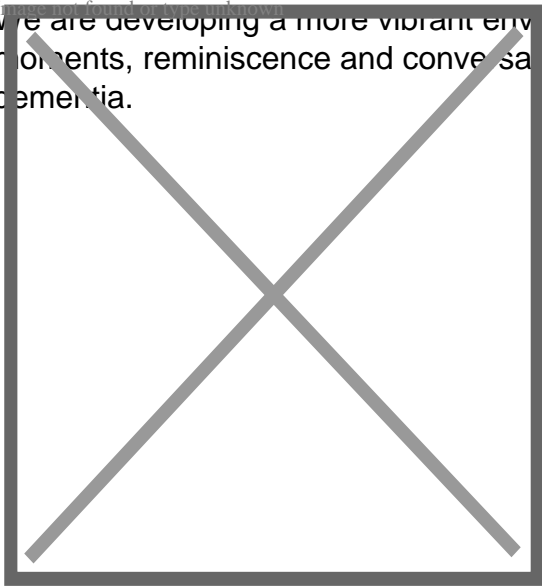
“One lady who used to find it hard to remember which door was her bedroom now knows it’s hers by the big yellow flower,” said Cant, Home Manager at Furze Hill House, who retires next month after 38 years’ experience working in older people’s social care.

Furze Hill House, located in North Walsham, Norfolk, U.K., is home to many residents living with dementia.



Stimulate their senses

We are developing a more vibrant environment so as to create opportunities for spontaneous moments, reminiscence and conversation—things that become more difficult for people living with dementia.



So far we have decorated our two downstairs corridors—one

is garden-themed with flowers, butterflies, trees, bees and an ivy-covered trellis while the other has a seaside theme with flying seagulls, beach balls, palm trees, beach huts, a lighthouse and even a mermaid. We’d love to add the sound of bird song and waves to the corridors, too.

The garden and the seaside are places where memories may have been made with family and friends and we’re finding that a simple walk down the corridor is now leading to conversations about

holidays and childhood.

The bright colors we've chosen are also helping. One lady who used to find it hard to remember which door was her bedroom now knows it's hers by "the big yellow flower."

The next project is the garden. We are working in partnership with the North Walsham Garden Centre to design a sensory garden. As we age, our senses diminish, but touch and smell are two of the last senses to be affected by the aging process. We want to enable our residents to get closer to the plants, to see and smell them more easily and to enjoy their different shapes and textures.

What can you do to help someone living with dementia? Ideas that you could try:

- Add color to a room with bright cushions, walls and decorations.
- Play recordings of their favorite music or sounds.
- Keep fragrant plants and flowers inside the home and in the garden.
- Have lots of photos of friends, family and favorite places in frames and albums.

Involve them in everyday activities and encourage hobbies

Our residents have raised children, led busy lives, had successful careers and enjoyed hobbies. We want them to feel that they can make a contribution to the running of their home and to know they still have something to offer.

We find that some of our female residents get restless or agitated in the afternoon—that's often because it's the time of day when they would have welcomed their children home from school or started getting dinner ready for the family. So we try to channel their energy into something productive.

For some, knitting, doing a crossword, drawing, or listening to music may help. For others, a practical household task such as gardening, cooking, mending clothes or polishing shoes will make them feel better. Sometimes a simple walk in the garden is all that's needed.

Obviously their abilities may not be what they used to be, so if they have always enjoyed reading poetry and now find it hard to read, we may read aloud together. Or for those who have enjoyed cooking, we may suggest a task such as buttering bread or decorating cakes.

Ideas that you could try:

- Leave tactile prompts nearby—an open book, an unfinished jigsaw, knitting needles with a ball of wool.
- Look for ways that you could involve them in an everyday task—could they dry the dishes after a meal, fold clothes to help with the washing, or water some plants?

Be flexible to their wishes but don't forget your own well-being

We may organize activities and plan an event but the residents are encouraged to choose what they want to do and when they want to do it. This includes when they want to wake up, eat breakfast, or if they'd prefer to go for a walk instead of participating in a group activity.

Ultimately our home is not ruled by routines and tasks but led by our residents—it's a "living" space. We have a quote on the wall outside the office that says, "Our residents do not live in our workplace,

we work in their home.”

But caring for someone with dementia isn't easy. Some forms of dementia can lead to aggression or loss of inhibitions. When a resident's actions are distressing or unpredictable we try to reflect on their surroundings at the time to better understand the trigger. I remember a resident who would suddenly start taking off his clothes, but we realized that this was his way of telling us he was hot.

Ideas that you could try:

- Don't worry if things don't go according to plan—have a Plan B ready.
- Depersonalize the situation—this is difficult if you are caring for a loved one but remember that a person with dementia isn't trying to be difficult; they are usually just finding it hard to express themselves.
- If they do become suddenly distressed or behave unpredictably, think about their environment and what may have triggered their behavior.
- Make sure you have a break and build your own support network. The support we give each other as a staff team is really important and we have an onsite chaplain who is available if we need to have a chat. Do you have friends or relatives you can talk to, or can you reach out to a local church or charity?

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