

Understanding Dementia

e4 PEOPLE



Dementia is a complex condition that impacts a person's cognitive and physical abilities, behaviour, and sensory perception over time. Understanding its effects is crucial to providing effective care and support.

Key Facts about Dementia

- Over **433,330 Australians are living with dementia** (as of 2025).
- Without significant interventions, this number is expected to **double by 2058**.
- Dementia is the **leading cause of death for women** and the **second leading cause for men**, after coronary heart disease.
- More than **half of residents in aged care facilities have dementia**.
- Approximately **two-thirds of people with dementia live in the community**.



Types of Dementia: Recognising Symptoms

Alzheimer's Disease

- Gradual deterioration that can begin as early as ages 50 to 60, though symptoms may only become obvious around age 75.
- Affects brain function, including:
 - Memory.
 - Critical thinking and reasoning.
 - Language and motor skills.
- Comparison of healthy brain versus deteriorated brain can illustrate effects on lobes and overall function.

Lewy Body Dementia

- Symptoms include:
 - Fluctuations in mental health and alertness.
 - Visual, auditory or tactile hallucinations.
 - REM sleep behaviour disorders.
 - Parkinsonian symptoms such as rigidity and tremors.
- Vision changes: difficulty with peripheral vision, depth perception, contrast, and visual misidentification.
- Mobility becomes harder over time; challenges increase as symptoms of memory loss, movement, and misinterpretation worsen.

Vascular Dementia

- Often caused by decreased blood flow to the brain due to lifestyle factors such as high cholesterol, obesity, smoking, and physical inactivity.
- Symptoms include:
 - Impaired reasoning, judgement, and planning ability.
 - Physical challenges like shuffling gait, unsteady walking, and tremors.
 - Depression, confusion, and disorientation.

Frontotemporal Dementia

- Often leads to personality changes, which can be difficult for loved ones to navigate.
- Symptoms may include:
 - Loss of impulse control and empathy.
 - Difficulty comprehending language and issues with repetition (e.g., echolalia).
 - Changes in behaviour and apathy.
 - Loss of insight (anosognosia) – person may not realise their deficits.

Sensory Changes in Dementia

Dementia can cause profound sensory changes, which may impact an individual's ability to process their environment:

- Vision and Perception – Difficulty interpreting patterns, faces, objects, distances, etc.
- Hearing and Sound Processing – Sensitivity to noise, trouble filtering background sound, misinterpretation of audio cues, and audio hallucinations.
- Touch and Temperature – Reduced awareness of hot and cold; heightened sensitivity during personal care (e.g., bathing).
- Smell and Taste – Changes in taste preferences, difficulty recognising good or spoiled food, or distinguishing spices.
- Body Awareness (Proprioception) – Challenges in knowing limb placement or navigating smaller spaces.

Physical Changes in Dementia

As dementia progresses, individuals may experience:

- Mobility and Movement Issues: Frequent falls, difficulty using mobility aids, or forgetting how to use them.
- Posture and Muscle Tone: Changes in posture leading to forward stooping and a downward gaze.
- Fine Motor Skills: Trouble using utensils or tools, requiring occupational therapy and adapted objects to maintain independence.
- Continence Changes: Difficulty recognising bodily urges, requiring proactive steps to ensure dignity and comfort.
- Eating and Swallowing: Challenges chewing and swallowing; may necessitate carefully adapted diets.
- Sleep Patterns: Trouble distinguishing day versus night; long daytime naps can disrupt night time sleep routines.

Behavioural Changes in Dementia

Behavioural changes in dementia are often the result of unmet needs or an individual's condition worsening. Key points:

- Sudden mood changes or habits can indicate distress or unmet needs.
- Behaviour might be linked to their impacted brain areas, affecting emotions, reasoning, and interactions.
- Common unmet needs include:
 - Hunger or thirst.
 - Wanting to go outside or take a walk.
 - Seeking company or comfort.

Supporting Changed Behaviour:

- Take time to understand the person – their preferences, history, and needs.
- Avoid labelling or dismissive language.
- Use the four helpful strategies:
 - ASK: Always offer choices; avoid telling or demanding.
 - ACCEPT: Validate their reality instead of correcting them.
 - AGREE: Don't argue or challenge – validate their emotions and experiences.
 - APOLOGISE: If something goes wrong, acknowledge it and reassure them.

Supportive Strategies for Living Well with Dementia

- Know the person: Discover their likes, dislikes, history, and personality before diagnosis to tailor care accordingly.
- Respect their history: Honour who the person is – a life well-lived matters.
- Personalise care: Design and deliver care centred around individual needs, preferences, and cultural or personal backgrounds.
- Be a detective: Always investigate the root cause of behavioural changes with empathy and understanding to meet their needs.

Example: If they announce they have “lost their wallet,” avoid accusations and frustrations. Work with them collaboratively on solutions.

Kindness and Empathy Matter

- Every interaction counts – simply taking five minutes to connect can profoundly impact someone living with dementia.
- Observe, be proactive, and report concerns that could prevent further struggles.

Remember: If nothing else, take away this message – be kind to someone living with dementia.

What action can you take today?

How can you provide personalised, person-centred care on your next shift?

