

Emotional Safety Techniques

for working with people living with dementia

All of us experience our world through our senses. Celebrating what the person living with Alzheimer's can experience and providing appropriate stimulation to that person's sensory world can bring joy to the person's day. Knowing a person's life story and preferences helps us make a personal connection using each person's history and sensory memory.

It is through our senses that we view the world around us.

Consider the following techniques and tips for increasing the emotional safety of a person living with dementia, based on each of the five senses.

The Sense of Sight

As we age, our eyes usually become less efficient. And people living with dementia may become confused about what they see. They may see a person or an animal in what is really a shadow. They may view their own reflection in a mirror or window as that of a stranger. People living with Alzheimer's disease and some other dementias may also lose the ability to use peripheral vision and are unable to see items close to themselves.

Some helpful tips for addressing the sense of sight are:

- Use natural daylight whenever possible.
- Increase the level of light.
- Use different colors when painting walls and hallways to increase contrast.
- Minimize glare.
- Consider covering reflective surfaces.
- Approach the person from the front.
- Create murals and scrap books of favorite scenes/people.
- When possible, avoid busy patterns in floor covering which can be interpreted as threatening or confusing to a person living with dementia.

The Sense of Hearing

Meaningful hearing has a major impact on the quality of life for a person living with dementia. Hearing affects a person's ability to make sense out of conversation and people living with dementia including Alzheimer's disease often have difficulty with this skill.

Some helpful tips for addressing the sense of hearing are:

- Approach the person from the front.
- Minimize background noise (i.e. turn off radio or TV).
- Speak in a normal tone, don't yell.
- Use visual cues to add meaning to your words (i.e. mime drinking).
- Discover the person's preferences when selecting music by using music they listened to in the past or music they respond positively to now.

The Sense of Smell

People living with dementia may lose protective smell. They may not recognize the smell of smoke and/or spoiled food as a dangerous thing. On the other hand, pleasant odors can help people relax and can stir up fond memories.

Some helpful tips for addressing the sense of smell are:

- Use aromatherapy in the form of fragrant plug-ins, oils or flameless candles.
- Remove unpleasant odors.
- Walk in the garden or provide cut flowers indoors.
- Discover a person's favorite aromas (by asking family/friends or through observation).

The Sense of Taste

The senses of sweet and salty are reduced in a person living with dementia. The sense of bitter is retained longer. A person living with Alzheimer's disease may crave foods that are very sweet and/or salty and will tend to give in to that craving because of poor impulse control.

Some helpful tips for addressing the sense of taste are:

- Offer smoothies and other foods that are high in nutritional value and are sweet.
- Provide meals that appeal to the individual and reduce the sense of hunger.
- Limit access to condiments, salt shakers and sugar containers.

The Sense of Touch

All people have their own sense of personal space which must be respected. People living with dementia have a right to determine who may and who may not

enter into that personal space. Touching with the entire palm feels safer to a person living with dementia than touching with the fingertips only.

Some helpful tips for addressing the sense of touch are:

- Respect the person's response to being touched.
- Touch with your entire palm.
- Keep in mind over-sensitivity to touch.
- Provide comforting textures in the form of linens, towels, blankets, and other items the person may touch frequently.