

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION AND KEEPING IN TOUCH

For most of us, regular contact with loved ones plays a key part in our lives and it fulfils many of our psychological needs and contributes to our wellbeing. Likewise, if we are deprived of regular contact with the people that are important to us then it would be expected that this would have a negative impact on our wellbeing and cause some distress. For people with dementia these needs are not different to anyone else's, and social interactions are directly linked to wellbeing. Abrupt halts to, or changes in, routine visits can cause distress, increase anxiety and cause confusion. People with dementia rely heavily on the support of others for these contacts to happen, particularly in times of uncertainty where other things can easily take priority. Below are some examples of how keeping in contact with loved ones can meet the needs of someone with dementia in a care home setting and some tips on how to do this.

### HOW CAN REGULAR CONTACT MEET PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS AND MAINTAIN WELLBEING?

- By *reducing loneliness* – Losing regular contact with family members/friends can result in loneliness. Loneliness can lead to low mood, withdrawal, lost appetite and sleep difficulties. Regular contact with friends and family is an effective way to maintain someone's wellbeing and reduce distress associated with loneliness.
- By *providing inclusion* – Contact with loved ones can help someone to feel included and part of a group, such as a family or a relationship. Lack of inclusion can lead to heightened agitation, frustration and result in an increased need for interaction and reassurance from staff or other residents.
- By *maintaining routines* – Regular visits or contact from people outwith the care home can for many people be part of a routine. Routines are important, particularly for people with dementia and in times of uncertainty. Maintaining contact with family members or friends can help to reinforce routine and reduce anxiety, worry and confusion. If a person with dementia is confused about where a loved one is it is understandable that they would engage in repetitive searching or wandering in corridors.
- By meeting *the need of attachment* – Most of us rely on contact with other humans in some shape or form in order to fulfil our needs of attachment. Relationships and bonds with others are key ingredients for our wellbeing. This is not different for people with dementia. By supporting someone with dementia to keep in contact with family members it is also helping them to meet their attachment needs. This can help to prevent low mood, apathy and loneliness.

## **SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO KEEP IN TOUCH WITHOUT FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT**

- Postcards/letters/pictures – This can be a simple but helpful method to keep in contact. If family or friends write a short message this can be shared more than once and provide comfort on several occasions. Staff could direct a resident to the postcard or letter if they feel distressed. These could be sent by post, emailed for staff to print or scanned if original copies are precious.
- Email – Similar to letters/postcards, an email can serve the same function if read out loud to a resident.
- Smart phones – Mobile phones are accessible and can share pictures, voice messages and videos. Several different methods and applications exist to assist staff and family members. Smartphones can provide live communication or alternatively a message can be recorded and used on several occasions. Some examples of applications that are free for download on smartphones are: Facetime, Whatsapp, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype.
- Laptops – Skype is one of the many applications that is free and accessible to download for laptops. The examples above for smart phones also exist for laptops.
- Recordings - Recordings can be particularly helpful for people with impaired vision and can be done using phones or recording devices and sent by post or via email. A recording could be a brief message from a family member or friend.
- Consider Simulated Presence Therapy (SPT) if the sight or sound, on audio or video, of a loved one may provide comfort and reassurance. Having a video/audio recording may enable care home staff to play this repeatedly if videoconferencing contact is forgotten by residents with dementia.

## **SOME POINTS TO CONSIDER REGARDING THE ABOVE-MENTIONED COMMUNICATION METHODS**

- How will the person with dementia react? It is important that staff and family members consider how the person with dementia will perceive each method. Have they engaged with Skype or smartphones before? Seeing a loved one on a small screen can potentially be stressful and confusing if it is the first time they interact with this technology. Similarly, what postcard is chosen and what will this mean to the person with dementia?
- Preparation - Some methods of communication require a bit of preparation. For example, downloading the application and having a calm, quiet and private environment to use for live or pre-recorded communication to maximise the impact of this.

- Time - Has sufficient time been put aside? It is important to organise a time with family members and to ensure this is organised before engaging the person with dementia to avoid confusion. However, this is not that different to face-to-face visits which also require some time to be set aside.
- Which method works with whom? Some people with dementia might appreciate being able to directly communicate via video call. Others might be less able to communicate directly and perhaps benefits more from a picture or postcard with a text read out by staff.
- Does the person need their hearing aids or glasses? Individual needs and abilities should be considered here, and it might be worth thinking about the people on the other end, what is most helpful for them?
- Continue to monitor and assess how adapted communication methods are impacting on the person with dementia and adjust accordingly. They may become emotional – this is not necessarily a negative sign – it may be a sign of emotional connection.
- If any method of communication causes really significant levels of distress consider another of the ideas here instead.

## EVIDENCE

Guidance from the British Geriatric Society recommends that care homes should take advantage of videoconferencing software on smartphones, tablets and portable computers as much as possible to maintain human contact for residents (Gordon et al., 2020). It has been shown that images or voice recordings of a family member can have a calming effect (Garland et al. 2007). Studies have found that showing a distressed person with dementia a video clip of a family member, provides them with comfort and reassurance and reduces distress. Similarly, one study showed that resistance to care was reduced after playing a recording of a family member encouraging the individual to allow staff to help (O'Connor et al, 2011).

*For more suggestions, support or if you have any questions about this information sheet please get in contact with the Edinburgh Behaviour Support Service on 0131 537 6044 or email us on [EBSS@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:EBSS@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk)*