



Understanding Dementia:
A Caregiver's Guide to Support,
Communication & Care

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Introduction

Caring for someone living with dementia—whether it be a spouse, parent, sibling, friend, or neighbour—is an emotional experience.

You may feel love and gratitude for the moments you share, but also sadness, worry, or exhaustion as you watch their memory and independence change. It can be overwhelming to navigate the uncertainty of what each day may bring, all while trying to ensure your loved one feels safe, understood, and valued.

At Chartwell, we understand how deeply personal this journey is. We believe that **knowledge can ease uncertainty, empathy can preserve dignity, and having the right support network can transform your caregiving journey.** Our goal is to walk alongside you, offering understanding, practical strategies, and compassionate care options so you feel less alone in the path ahead.

In this guide, you'll learn how to:

- Understand dementia and its many forms
- Recognize the difference between normal aging and signs of cognitive impairment
- See the world from the perspective of someone living with dementia
- Learn practical strategies for communication and connection
- Explore how memory care in a retirement residence can benefit both your loved one and your family

No matter where you are in this journey, we hope these insights bring you clarity and the reassurance that you and your loved one are not alone.

Understanding Dementia

What is dementia?

Dementia is not a single disease—it's an umbrella term used to describe a group of conditions caused by damage to brain cells that affects a person's thinking, memory, emotions, behaviour, and ability to carry out daily activities.

It can affect each person differently, depending on the areas of the brain involved and the progression of the condition. While no cure currently exists, understanding the type of dementia your loved one is living with can help you better support their needs and adapt your care. According to the [Alzheimer Society of Canada](#), the most common types include:



Alzheimer's Disease

The most common form of dementia, Alzheimer's is characterized by the gradual build-up of abnormal proteins in the brain that disrupt communication between brain cells. Early signs often include difficulty remembering recent events or conversations, followed by challenges with reasoning, language, and eventually, daily self-care. Alzheimer's typically progresses slowly but steadily.

Vascular Dementia

Caused by reduced blood flow to the brain—often following strokes or small vessel disease—vascular dementia can develop suddenly or gradually. Symptoms may include slowed thinking, difficulty concentrating, and problems with organization and decision-making. The pattern of changes often reflects the location of the brain damage.

Lewy Body Dementia

Named after the abnormal protein deposits ("Lewy bodies") that develop in brain cells, this type shares symptoms with both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease. It often includes fluctuations in alertness and attention, visual hallucinations, movement difficulties, and sleep disturbances. These symptoms can vary widely from day to day.

Frontal Temporal Dementia (FTD)

FTD is caused by progressive damage to the frontal and/or temporal lobes of the brain, the areas responsible for personality, behaviour, and language. People with FTD may experience significant personality changes, inappropriate social behaviour, loss of empathy, or difficulties with speech and understanding language, often before memory is noticeably affected.



The scope of the challenge

Today, an estimated **50 million people worldwide** live with dementia, a number expected to triple by 2050. In Canada, diagnoses are projected to more than double between 2017 and 2027, meaning most families will be touched by dementia in some way during their lifetime.

What dementia is not

It's important to remember that dementia is not a normal part of aging. While many older adults may notice changes like slower recall, occasional word-finding difficulty, or needing more time to make decisions, these are part of natural aging and do not significantly disrupt daily life.

Dementia, by contrast, involves progressive, disruptive changes that impact safety, independence, relationships, and overall well-being. Recognizing this difference early is key to accessing the right care and support for your loved ones.

Recognizing the Signs: Dementia vs. Normal Aging

When you spend a lot of time with a loved one, it can be difficult to tell whether changes in memory, mood, or behaviour are part of the normal aging process—or signs of something more serious. This uncertainty can feel unsettling. You may find yourself wondering, “Am I overreacting?” or “Is this just what happens as we get older?”

Normal signs of aging

It's natural for our brains to slow down slightly as we age. These changes typically happen gradually and don't interfere with daily life. Normal age-related changes might include:

- Being slower to think or act
- Pausing before making decisions
- Occasionally mixing up names, but still recognizing people and their relationship to you
- Misplacing objects now and then, but retracing steps to find them

These shifts can be a normal part of getting older and are usually not cause for alarm.





Potential warning signs of dementia

Dementia is different. It's progressive and involves **changes that disrupt independence, safety, and relationships**. You may notice your loved one:

- Struggling to start tasks or follow steps in familiar activities, such as making tea or paying a bill
- Having difficulty recognizing familiar people or places—even close family members or their own home
- Becoming confused about the time, date, or events, or appearing “stuck” in a past moment
- Struggling with word recall, even when offered visual or verbal prompts
- Showing sudden or unexplained personality or mood changes, such as irritability, withdrawal, or suspicion
- Losing interest in hobbies or social activities that once brought joy

A compassionate perspective

It's important to remember that these signs are **not a reflection of who your loved one is at their core**, but of the changes happening in their brain. Their behaviours, while sometimes challenging, are often attempts to communicate unmet needs, confusion, or fear. Recognizing these patterns with compassion allows you to respond with empathy rather than frustration, preserving the connection you share.

When to seek help

If these changes are **interfering with your loved one's safety, daily activities, or relationships**, it's time to seek a medical assessment. Early identification of dementia can help you put supports in place, adapt your approach, and plan for the future together.

The Lived Experience of Dementia: **Building Empathy**



When a person is living with dementia, the way they perceive and process the world can change in ways that are difficult for others to imagine.

Their reality may no longer align with our shared “present.” Instead, it may be shaped by a **patchwork of memories, feelings, and images from their past**, woven together with moments from today. In this altered reality, events that happened decades ago may feel like they occurred just yesterday, while recent experiences may fade quickly. This can be confusing for caregivers, but for your loved one, these moments feel vivid and true.

Why empathy matters

Approaching your loved one’s reality with empathy—not correction—can transform your interactions.

- **Reassurance matters more than correction.** Arguing over facts (“No, that person passed away years ago”) can create distress. Instead, validate the emotion behind their words (“You miss them, don’t you?”).
- **Entering their reality builds trust and comfort.** If your loved one believes they are waiting for a bus to work, you might sit beside them and talk about their job from that time in their life. This shared connection can be soothing.
- **Behaviour is often communication in disguise.** Repetition, withdrawal, or sudden agitation can signal unmet needs—like hunger, discomfort, or loneliness—rather than simply being “difficult.”





Avoiding harmful labels

One of the most damaging habits—often unintentional—is defining someone solely by their diagnosis or symptoms. Words like “wanderer,” “angry,” “hoarder,” or “violent” can limit our understanding and overshadow the person’s humanity. Instead, try to **see the person first**:

- Recall their life story, accomplishments, and passions
- Notice what still brings them joy, calm, or engagement
- Understand their preferences, dislikes, and fears

This perspective shift helps you move from focusing solely on what has changed to **cherishing what remains**—a vital part of preserving dignity and connection.



Communication Tips for **Caregivers**

Caring for someone living with dementia means communicating in ways that may feel unfamiliar at first. As the condition progresses, the **ability to process language, read facial expressions, and interpret body language** can change, sometimes gradually, sometimes suddenly. For caregivers, this can be frustrating, especially when you feel like your words aren't getting through.

But here's the good news: communication is **much more than just words**, and even as verbal skills decline, your loved one can still connect deeply through tone, touch, and shared moments.

See behaviour as communication

Every action—whether it's repeating a question, withdrawing from conversation, or showing sudden agitation—can be an attempt to communicate a need, emotion, or sense of confusion.

- A repeated question might be a sign of **anxiety or uncertainty**
- Pacing could indicate **restlessness or discomfort**
- Refusal to participate in an activity might mean they feel **tired, overwhelmed, or unsafe**

When you reframe behaviours as messages, your role shifts from “fixing the problem” to listening **between the lines**.

The sensory order of communication

Chartwell's dementia care training highlights an important insight: **people living with dementia process sensory input in a specific order—see, hear, touch, smell, taste**. This means the way you approach your loved one can set the tone for the entire interaction:

1. **Visual first:** Make sure they see you before you speak. Always approach from the front, at eye level, and smile warmly.
2. **Then verbal:** Use short, clear sentences. Pause between thoughts. Give them time to process before expecting a response.
3. **Touch last:** Only offer gentle touch once you know they are aware of your presence—it should be reassuring, not startling.

Practical communication tips



Be patient with repetition: If your loved one repeats themselves, answer as though it's the first time you've heard the question. Repetition may soothe them, so lean into the rhythm rather than resisting it.



Validate before redirecting: Acknowledge their feelings first ("It sounds like you're worried"), then gently guide them toward a calming or engaging activity.



Keep choices simple: Offer two options instead of many ("Would you like tea or coffee?").



Use familiar topics: Draw on memories, hobbies, or music they've always enjoyed to spark comfort and conversation.



Mind your tone and expression: A calm voice and open body language can be more reassuring than the words themselves.

Your emotional well-being matters too

Communicating with someone living with dementia can be emotionally draining, especially on challenging days. **Give yourself permission to pause, take a deep breath, and return** to the conversation when you feel more grounded. Remember: you are learning a new language together, one built on patience, empathy, and presence.



Why **Memory Care** Might Be the Right Choice



Even with love, dedication, and the best intentions, there may come a time when caring for a loved one with dementia at home feels overwhelming—physically, emotionally, and even financially. You may notice that the needs of your loved one have grown beyond what you can safely or consistently provide, or that your own health and well-being are beginning to be affected.



This is not a sign of failure. It is a sign of **love, responsibility, and foresight** to recognize when more support is needed. Sometimes, the greatest gift you can give is helping ensure your loved one is in a safe, nurturing environment where their days are filled with dignity, comfort, and connection—and where you can return to simply being their spouse, child, or friend, instead of their primary caregiver.

Why consider a Chartwell memory care residence?

At Chartwell, our Memory Care and Memory Living neighbourhoods are designed specifically for older adults living with dementia or Alzheimer's disease, offering:

- **A person-centred approach:** Every resident is seen as an individual first. Care plans are based on their unique history, preferences, and personality—not just their diagnosis.
- **Higher staff-to-resident ratios:** Our trained teams engage with residents meaningfully, provide personalized assistance and respond quickly to changes in health or happiness.
- **Specialized environments:** Our spaces are safe, secure, and thoughtfully designed with clear visual cues, calming décor, and accessible layouts to help residents navigate more confidently and independently.
- **Purposeful daily life:** Days are structured around familiar routines, engaging activities, and opportunities for social interaction that create moments of connection—helping residents maintain a sense of purpose and joy.
- **Family support:** We partner closely with families, offering guidance, regular updates, and emotional support so you feel connected and reassured every step of the way.



Benefits for residents

- A **consistent, predictable routine** that reduces stress and confusion
- Opportunities to stay **meaningfully engaged** in a safe, supervised setting
- Care from **staff who are specially trained** in dementia support techniques
- **Dining and recreational experiences** tailored to honour their abilities and preferences

Benefits for families

- **Peace of mind** knowing your loved one is safe and cared for 24/7
- **Relief from the physical and emotional strain** of providing daily care alone, or trying to coordinate daily care with family or home care providers
- **More quality time** together, focused on moments of connection rather than tasks and responsibilities
- Access to **professional insight**, advice, and resources on dementia care

When to consider a transition to memory care

It may be time to explore memory care if your loved one:

- Needs help with daily activities such as **dressing, grooming, and meals**
- Is showing signs of wandering or **engaging in unsafe behaviours**
- Frequently becomes **anxious, agitated, or withdrawn**
- Is experiencing confusion that makes it **unsafe to be alone** for extended periods
- Has **care needs that exceed** what you or other family members can manage at home

Moving a loved one to a new setting is a significant decision—one that is often filled with mixed emotions. But it can also be a positive, life-enhancing step, offering both you and your loved one a renewed sense of stability and connection.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Caring for a loved one with dementia is a journey filled with love, resilience, and, at times, heartache. It can be overwhelming to balance the desire to keep them safe and engaged with the realities of their changing needs, as well as your own well-being—but you don't have to walk this path alone. With the right knowledge, a supportive care network, and an environment that understands the unique needs of people living with dementia, you can **help ensure your loved one's days are filled with reassurance, dignity, and moments of joy.**



At Chartwell, we believe that every person deserves to be seen for who they are—not just their diagnosis. Our Memory Care and Memory Living neighbourhoods are built on compassion, respect, and the belief that meaningful moments matter at every stage of life. Whether you need **guidance, education, or a safe place** for your loved one to live well, we are here to listen and help.

How to begin your retirement living journey

If you feel it may be time to explore memory care options for a loved one, we encourage you to:



Find a Chartwell Memory Care or Memory Living residence near you.



Speak with a Retirement Living Consultant to discuss your family's needs, preferences, and provincial options.



Book a tour and experience first-hand how our dedicated teams create a safe, enriching, and compassionate setting for those living with dementia



No matter where you are in this journey, remember: you are not alone. We are here to walk beside you and your loved one, helping you both find peace of mind in the days ahead.

Call us at 1-855-461-0685 or visit [Chartwell.com](https://www.chartwell.com) today.

The information in this guide is for general knowledge only. It is not intended to provide medical advice or replace the advice of your doctor or other healthcare professionals. Chartwell is not responsible for decisions made based on this information. Always consult a qualified healthcare provider for personalized advice or treatment.

If you are looking for guidance
during your retirement living journey,
we're here to support you and your family.



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Connect with us today to begin exploring your options.

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