

Providing person-centred support for residents living with dementia who need to be isolated in care homes during the COVID-19 crisis

This information sheet has been developed by the Association for Dementia Studies at the University of Worcester (www.worc.ac.uk/dementia) to help support care homes during this difficult time. It is best practice at the time of writing and is general advice only. Each resident should be assessed on an ongoing and individual basis to find the best response and the latest national sector guidance should be followed.

The move into a care home or any change from normal routine is stressful for a person living with dementia at the best of times; even more so during this crisis. This guidance aims to help you reduce this stress and be person-centred during this challenging time. Every person is different and so the way they are experiencing this crisis and the help they need will also be different. It is also a difficult time for staff in care homes, and so this guidance should reassure you that you are providing good care, even though the circumstances are very unusual and demanding.

It is important to remember throughout that the Mental Capacity Act (and Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards) still apply to the way we work with people living with dementia. When someone lacks the capacity to make an informed decision about how to live day-to-day during this crisis, they have the right to have good decisions made on their behalf: decisions that aim to achieve their best interests in the least restrictive way possible. This will mean **balancing the need for social distancing, isolation and infection control with any negative impact or distress those measures may cause a resident** who cannot understand the current situation. Whilst social distancing/infection control are in residents' best interests, there are different ways to achieve these and you should aim for the one that physically restricts the person the least and emotionally supports their well-being the most. This is a careful, individual and changeable judgement call.



Strategies to help the person understand the COVID-19 situation

When working with a person living with dementia it can be easy to assume that they cannot understand what is happening, but people are often take-in more than we think. Finding a few simple ways to explain the current situation to residents can be very helpful. However, if an individual appears to be distressed by any of these, do not pursue them.

- Use a simple written explanation of the situation. A staff member could read it with the resident and then leave it with them.

- Display a simple poster in key places for the person (e.g. bathroom door).
- Use a simple explanation for the situation that can be consistently used by staff when interacting with residents (e.g. *“there is a very nasty bug around at the moment and so we have to wear this to keep everyone safe”*). This will help some residents to remember and also ensure that staff’s worries are not inadvertently passed onto residents.
- Remember that seeing someone in full PPE can be frightening and so reassurance will need to be given at every interaction, even when the staff member is used to the situation.

Useful links and resources

- An easy-read guide to social distancing: [Easy Read - 'Keeping away from other people'](#)
- Dementia: The Montessori Way provides a [simple COVID-19 poster and booklet](#)

Strategies to create an inviting isolation space

As much as possible should be done BEFORE a person moves into the space to increase the chances of positive association. This is particularly so if it is a new resident and a family member cannot accompany them for the move. Any items brought in from outside the care home will need to be quarantined and disinfected prior to being used, so forward planning is important.

- Gather as much information about the person before they move in.
- Ask family members to provide significant items for the person’s bedroom from their previous home, (or if just changing rooms, carry them across). These might include photographs, bedspreads, soft toys, handbag, cushions etc. Set these items up in the person’s bedroom, making the room look as familiar to the person as possible.
- Whilst objects are important, try to keep floor spaces/walking routes clutter-free to avoid slips and trips. This is more of a risk in unfamiliar spaces.
- Encourage family members/significant people to write a letter or record a film or audio-message reassuring the resident that they are safe and that family and friends will stay in touch.
- Make sure that every resident has a TV, radio, CD player, digital music player in their room.
- Plan in advance for in-room activities that may keep the person occupied. This can change as you get to know what works or doesn’t work, but don’t let boredom set in!
- If at all possible, staff who are likely to have contact with the new resident in the first week should introduce themselves from an appropriate distance without PPE covering their faces. Photographs of staff without PPE could also be used to help with this.



Useful links and resources

- The ["this is me" document](#) is a simple way to gather information to get to know the person



Strategies to occupy the person in an isolation space

The key to encouraging a person to stay in a particular space is to make that space interesting. A lot of distress and seeking-out behaviour stems from boredom. Research shows that just 15 minutes of one-to-one interaction once or twice a day reduces calling-out and agitation for people living with dementia in care homes.

- Create a daily plan based on the person's favourite music, TV and hobbies. This should focus on providing engaging activity *throughout* the day rather than at fixed times, and be pitched to the abilities of the individuals (e.g. folding laundry, sorting items in a rummage box, tidying a drawer, looking at photos, painting a picture, reading or watching a specific DVD).
- Ask families or local volunteer groups to make up activity boxes for the residents. These should contain sensory items and anything that might hold the person's interest. If they are used only in one person's room the cross-contamination risk is minimised, although do make sure the items are suitable for the resident and disinfected before being brought into the home.
- Whenever a staff member interacts with the person in an isolation space they should ensure the person is engaged in an activity before they leave (e.g. "We have some socks here that need sorting, could you help by pairing them up for me?") Initiation of an activity, even when materials are in reach can be difficult for many people living with dementia.
- Music is known to be very powerful for people living with dementia. Unless it distresses the person or conflicts with an alternative activity, ensure the person has music playing that they enjoy. Pay special attention to music that comforts and relaxes the person. You could ask a family member to create an individual playlist on a cheap MP3 player for the person's room.
- If you do not have personalised information about the person, try options that work with other people and observe to see what has a positive effect.
- Consider using simulated presence: This is an audio or film recording from a significant person that reassures the resident that they are safe, and that family and friends have not forgotten them. You could get creative with this: maybe a school child who needs to practice their reading could be filmed telling a story and shared with the resident?

Useful links and resources

- The [National Activity Providers Association](#) has made their resources free including this [Guide to activities during social distancing](#)
- The Daily Sparkle has a range of [free resources](#) available, focused on residents who are isolated
- [Playlists for Life](#) is a great website for music in dementia, including some covid-19 resources
- [Active Minds](#) sell activity kits for people of all abilities and designed with infection control in mind
- A guide to: [online resources for activities for older people](#)
- Remind Me Care are provided 6 months free [resources](#)

Using the environment to encourage isolation

The physical environment is a useful tool for helping to orient a resident and encouraging or discouraging certain activity. However, it is very important to make sure that measures aren't overly-restrictive as this can cause greater frustration and activity from the person, increasing risk.

- Carefully consider whether closing a person's bedroom door is necessary, (has every other option been tried?) A closed door is only useful for aiding isolation/infection control if the person is not distressed by it. Distress and anxiety will increase the likelihood of the person wanting to leave the room. In many situations, an open door and the opportunity to see others and receive verbal reassurance from a distance will encourage the person to stay-put for longer periods of time and result in less frustration and escalating behaviour. You could consider the use of assistive technology as an alternative to physical measures (e.g. a threshold alarm)
- Make sure the resident can see out of their window and that the view is not obstructed by large items on windowsills or TV screens. You could make a simple [birdfeeder](#) for them to watch
- Maximise connection to nature/the outside by making sure curtains are not blocking natural light.
- Think about the temperature, noise and lighting; is it comfortable? Does it encourage the person to stay inside? (e.g. not too warm/cold, sufficient light to see; quiet enough to hear their music?)
- Remember that some odours e.g. toilets or cleaning fluids can be really unpleasant and cause people to want to escape them, but pleasant smells can be evocative (e.g. fresh flowers in a room)
- Make sure people can see favourite items from where they spend their time (e.g. bed or chair).
- If the resident would like one, make sure that there is an easy to read clock and calendar in their room to support orientation
- Make sure snacks and a constant flow of drinks (if safe for the resident) are available in the person's room. This way they're less likely to 'seek' out food/drink by leaving the room.



Strategies to meet people's need for human contact

It is very important to remember that contact with others is a basic human need and so people living with dementia will naturally seek it out. Social isolation may be in a person's best interests right now, but that means we need to try and meet the need for human contact in other ways. The better you achieve this, the less likely the person is to try and seek out that contact (by leaving their space, going into other rooms etc.) or show their frustration through their behaviour.

- Try to facilitate safe time outside of the bedroom several times a day for the person. Where possible, make sure this includes outside/natural space, especially if this is part of the person's usual routine. This could be a walk in the garden, a trip down the corridor or time spent sat in a different part of the home. Remember physical exercise will help relax a person and improve sleep.
- Encourage interaction between residents and staff whilst observing social distancing: waves and smiles as you pass by a room is social contact and helps people to know they are not alone.
- Facilitate regular contact with families via letter, telephone and online, (cheap mobiles are available). Families may need to know that their contact is especially useful during this time.
- Consider if other residents with more understanding of the situation could volunteer to help by calling or writing to others. Feeling useful during this time is important and there may well be other residents in your home who would value the chance to be a 'buddy'.
- Link with local communities to receive letters, pictures and pen-pals for residents.
- Facilitate participation in online groups such as singing for the brain, seated exercise etc. These could be used for small group activities; where a few residents are in a communal area but at appropriate social distance from each other
- If a resident receives it well, offer a soft toy for a resident to hold as this can provide comfort.

Useful links and resources

- This [film](#) shared by NAPA shows an example of a group activity that observes social distancing.
- Several dementia singing groups have been made available online:
 - [Blue Skies Singing Group Online Session 1](#)
 - [Singing for the brain session - Spring](#)
 - [Singing for the Brain - session 2](#)
 - [Singing for the Brain - session 3](#)

Strategies to encourage a person to comply with infection control requirements

- Always explain what is happening and why each time you interact with the person. For example, explaining why you are having to wear a mask or visor can be reassuring.
- Do the activity alongside the person (e.g. wash your hands as well). Copying an action can be easier for some people than following verbal instructions
- Try to link into knowledge of the person to help e.g. "When your children were little did you have to make sure their hands were clean before meals?"
- Use music, singing and general chat to make sure these interactions are enjoyable. This is more important than ever during this time.
- If a person likes to be busy or join in staff activities, provide them with anti-bacterial wipes and encourage them to clean surfaces (e.g. handrails, doorknobs). This may be particularly useful for very mobile residents who need to walk to ease frustration and anxiety.



Remember: These are tough times, but they will end. Why not keep a list of all the things you and the resident would like to do when social distancing is no longer required?