

GUIDE · 6 MIN READ

How to talk to someone with dementia

Twelve small changes that make every conversation kinder. Most are countercultural — and they work.

01. Approach from the front

Coming up from behind, even gently, can startle. Face them at eye level so they can see you arrive.

02. Say their name, then yours

'Hi Mom, it's Ellen.' Even if they remember you, it removes the panic of having to place you.

03. One thing at a time

'Let's have a coffee' — not 'should we have coffee then go to the store then call your sister?'

04. Short sentences, normal words

Don't slow down or use baby language — that's patronizing and they feel it. Just shorter sentences.

05. Pause longer than feels natural

Processing can take 10–20 seconds. Don't fill the silence. Let them answer.

06. Don't quiz

Avoid 'do you remember...?' It's a test they'll fail. Say 'I was thinking about that trip we took to the lake...' and let them join in if they can.

07. Agree, redirect

If they say 'I need to pick the kids up from school' (the kids are 50), don't correct. 'They're fine, they're with David. Want a cookie?'

08. Use their world, not yours

If today they think it's 1972, meet them in 1972. Reality orientation makes most people more distressed, not less.

09. Mind your tone

Dementia steals words long before it steals the ability to read tone. A warm voice is heard even when the sentence isn't.

10. Touch, if they like it

A hand on the arm, a hug, holding hands. Often more reassuring than anything you can say.

11. Don't argue. Ever.

You'll never win, and you'll both feel worse. 'You might be right' is a magic sentence.

12. End on something good

Even if the visit is hard, leave on a small kindness — a song, a laugh, a familiar photo. It's what they'll carry into the next hour.

A calm answer at 3am, in their own voice

Sierra, the in-app dementia guide, will help you find the right words for the conversation you're dreading — without judgment. 7-day free trial.

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Free guide from The Care Companion — practical tools for families caring for someone with dementia. More guides at thecarecompanion.com/guides