

■ Be adaptable – allow for changes

Understand and accept the nature of the illness. You and the sufferer are trying to make the best of a bad situation – accept that change is a necessity. If the sufferer can eat more successfully with a spoon, but finds it difficult to manage a knife and fork, accept the change; don't fight it. Try to maintain a sense of humour.

■ Try to create the right environment

Confused people with poor memories need a familiar, established structured environment that is constant, predictable and simple. Try to build regular events into the weekly timetable. A calm, relaxed, unpressurised atmosphere will help draw out the best of their abilities. Provide memory aids such as a large calendar, clocks, a reminder board, signposts and labels and a large diary.

■ Encourage as much independence as possible

The longer sufferers are able to do things for themselves the longer they will be able to maintain a sense of dignity and self-worth, and avoid feelings of helplessness. It is very important to keep a balance between encouraging them to do things for themselves and doing things for them. Don't expect them to do everything, but don't take over. The attitude should be, 'Let me help you with that', rather than, 'Let me do it for you'. It is also important to offer protection from situations where they might fail, so instead of saying, 'You can cook the meal tonight' say, 'Could you help me peel the potatoes tonight'.

■ Keep communicating

When sufferers are confused, have a poor memory, and are emotionally upset, their most important fundamental need is to be able to communicate. Starved of communication with the outside world we all suffer. Two-way communication with a sufferer of dementia is a difficult, challenging, but ultimately rewarding task. Take into account and compensate for their sensory deficits. Is one ear better than the other? Are they short-sighted? Speak clearly, slowly and in short simple sentences. Allow them longer to respond – be prepared to repeat yourself if necessary. Talk about the past, using photographs and mementos to aid recall. Reminiscence is a valuable way of facilitating communication, as it is enjoyable and helps the person feel they are giving something back. Use touch to keep attention. Most importantly, be prepared to try to interpret and make sense of the meaning behind the sufferer's often confused words and thoughts. Recognise feelings from body language and facial expression.

■ Look after yourself

It is very common for carers to neglect themselves. Find time for a break and continue to do the things that you enjoy. Look for as much social support as possible. Encourage friends and relatives to become involved. If there are financial and legal arrangements to be made contact the Citizens Advice Bureau in the UK.