

Faith Communities



Dementia friendly faith communities can provide an important spiritual respite. As welcoming and compassionate environments, they offer families coping with dementia opportunities for meaningful engagement and spiritual connection. Through dementia friendly practices, entire faith communities can embrace and uplift people living with dementia and their care partners.

Ready to implement dementia friendly practices?

Follow these steps:

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Prepare

* Recognize the signs of dementia and encourage early diagnosis.
* Know local services that help people living with dementia and their care partners.

Learn

* Learn to use dementia friendly communication skills.
* Raise awareness by involving all ages in dementia education.

Respond

* Ensure the environment, programs and activities are engaging, dementia friendly, and suited to the situations, abilities and interests of each person living with dementia.
* Support care partners and families and recognize and respond to signs of care partner stress.
* Raise awareness, reduce stigma, and promote support in your community and others by spreading dementia friendly principles.

What is Dementia?

Dementia is a general term for a loss of memory and other thinking abilities that is serious enough to interfere with activities of daily life. Dementia has many causes. Alzheimer’s disease, the most common cause of dementia, is a disease of the brain that leads to problems with memory, thinking, and behavior. Alzheimer’s and other dementias are not a normal part of aging.

Signs of Dementia1

* Memory loss that disrupts daily life.
* Challenges in planning or solving problems
* Confusion when completing familiar tasks at home, at work, and/or during leisure activities.
* Confusion with time or place
* Challenges when attempting to understand visual images and spatial relationships
* Challenges with words when speaking, writing, and/or reading
* Accidently misplacing items and losing the ability to retrace steps
* Decreased or poor judgment.
* Withdrawal from work or social activities
* Changes in mood or personality

Dementia Friendly Communication Skills2,3

* Greet people living with dementia warmly even if you think they do not remember you. If they seem confused, remind them who you are.
* Ask “yes” or “no” questions and allow time for person to process and respond.
* Speak clearly and calmly; be patient and understanding.
* Keep communication simple; ask one question at a time.
* Listen with empathy and seek to understand the person’s reality or feelings.
* Connect on an emotional level even if the conversation topics shift or do not make sense to you.
* Be aware of the person’s and your own body language: smile, make eye contact at eye level.
* Enjoy spending time with the person in the present moment.
* Offer hugs or hand holding as appropriate.
* Avoid arguing with or embarrassing the person.
* Treat the person living with dementia with dignity and respect.
* If there are signs of elder abuse, neglect, self-neglect, and/or exploitation, or have concerns for the person’s safety, be sure to report it to 911 or to the local authorities.

Educate the Entire Faith Community1,2

1. Invite a person living with dementia or a care partner to give a talk about their experience living with the disease.
2. Provide ideas for ways to support people with dementia. Ideas:

* Offer to help a person living with dementia get ready for worship services or help with transporting.
* Express willingness to spend time with the person living with dementia so their care partner can run errands or take a break.
* Help the family worship at home or bring them a recording of the service when they find it difficult to attend in person.
* Offer a volunteer companion when extra support is needed.
* Accept and be sensitive to behaviors that people living with dementia may display, such as:
* Talking
* Calling out
* Walking about at inappropriate times
* Respond flexibly to encourage people to remain involved or help them to another area if necessary
* Help people living with dementia feel loved, valued, and a sense of belonging at a time when they may feel isolated.
* Provide ongoing prayer support for the person with dementia and their family/care partners.

Dementia Friendly Practices

1. Environmental tips:

* Wear name tags.
* Welcome, acknowledge, and support congregants and visitors with dementia.
* Be positive and focus on strengths and abilities rather than limitations.
* Be patient and understanding of appearance and behavior.
* Provide a quiet area where the person living with dementia may go during the service as needed.
* Display signs that clearly identify areas such as restrooms.

1. Engage:

* Organize activities that are meaningful to people living with dementia, allow them to connect with others, and accommodate their changing abilities.
* Offer shorter, simpler services, devotions, or inspirational stories.
* Encourage all ability levels when planning activities and outings.
* Plan visits that create spiritual connections and maximize interaction through familiar prayer or scripture or traditional hymns.
* Go beyond words and use music and spiritual symbols to engage the senses.
* Recognize the spiritual significance of spending time outdoors in nature or appreciating the arts.
* Organize a memory café or early-stage support group.

Learn more: [What is a Memory Café?](https://www.alz.org/wi/helping-you/early-stage-programs/memory-cafe)

[How to Start a Memory Café](https://www.memorycafedirectory.com/how-to-start-a-memory-cafe/)

1. Individualize:

* Build supportive relationships by linking people with dementia and their care partners with empathetic individuals within the congregation.
* Learn how the spiritual beliefs of the person with dementia and his or her care partners may affect their perceptions and experience of dementia.
* Be attuned and open-minded to the way the person living with dementia talks about his or her spirituality.

Care Partners, Families, and Stress

* Recognize signs of care partner stress and direct the care partner/family to appropriate resources.4

1. Belief that the person living with dementia will get better
2. Anger
3. Social withdrawal from activities once enjoyed
4. Anxiety about the future
5. Depression that makes it challenging to cope
6. Exhaustion that makes completing everyday tasks difficult
7. Sleeplessness
8. Irritability
9. Lack of concentration
10. Health problems

* What can you do?

1. Encourage care partners to take good care of themselves – eat properly, get regular exercise, rest, and accept help from others.
2. Offer support frequently, even if it is turned down.
3. When caregiving prevents attending in person, help care partners participate in worship at home by providing services, rituals, or recordings.
4. Encourage the care partner to enroll the person living with dementia in respite care for a break from daily responsibilities.
5. Form a care partner support group.

References

1. **Alzheimer’s Association, Know the 10 Signs**  
   <http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_10_signs_of_alzheimers.asp>
2. **Alzheimer’s Society – Communicating**  
   <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/info/20064/symptoms/90/communicating_and_language>
3. **Home Instead Business Training – Alzheimer’s Friendly Business online course**  
   <http://www.helpforalzheimersfamilies.com/alzheimers-care-training/alzheimers-friendly-business-training/>
4. **Alzheimer’s Association, Caregiver Stress**  
   <https://www.alz.org/care/alzheimers-dementia-caregiver-stress-burnout.asp>

Additional Resources

For additional resources related to the *Faith community* sector and a host of other community sectors, please visit [DFA's resource page](https://dfamerica.org/resource-listing/).

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Churches, synagogues, and other places of worship are just one important part of the community. These faith communities can work alongside other community sectors to help the entire community become more dementia friendly. Learn more about the process and help your community and others at www.dfamerica.org.