

Reasonable Anxiety and Dementia in People with Learning Disabilities

When people with learning disabilities develop dementia they lose the ability to transfer information from their short term memory to their long term memory. The effect of this problem is to make the person very anxious, but this is not always recognised by us. The anxiety can be displayed in many ways.

The person may become very anxious about leaving familiar environments. They may not remember where they are going or why, they may resist putting on their coat or demand to return to their familiar setting. We need to recognise why the person has become stressed and anxious and then look at what we can do to help reduce the person's level of anxiety.

This could include:

- Reassurance
- Verbal reminders
- Use of visual aids to remind the person where they are going
- Use of relaxation techniques that are already familiar to the person, e.g. aromatherapy and breathing exercises.

Early stages of dementia


People with learning disabilities and dementia can become stressed and anxious about many aspects of their daily life during the early stages of dementia. It is very easy for people to be labelled as having challenging behaviour because of the ways in which we and the environment stress the person.

The person may forget where they put their belongings and search endlessly for a forgotten object. They may agree to certain demands because they remember the last words that someone said to them, rather than because it is what they want to do. For example, a staff member may say to the person: 'It's tea-time, what would you like? A nice cup of tea or coffee?' The person may respond by saying the last word they remember, 'coffee', and then become very agitated when this is what they are given rather than the cup of tea that they actually wanted.

In the early stages of dementia, we need to think carefully about the amount of language we use when talking to the person, checking with them and using visual aids or objects to help them make choices so their life is stress-free.

Having a consistent approach is also vital, as the person begins to lose the ability to complete self-care tasks themselves. Each of us has our own personal care routine and the order in which we undertake tasks gives us a sense of security. However, in many settings, we may not have paid attention to the particular order with which people undertake tasks of daily living, eg does

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the person wash their face or brush their teeth first? What order do they put their clothes on? In our haste to help the person, we often impose our own routine on the person and then wonder why they get stressed, anxious and may exhibit 'challenging behaviour'. It is vital we observe and record routines in the early stages of dementia so that these can be used to help the person as their self-care skills begin to deteriorate.

Changing the environment to make it dementia friendly is another key area that can help to reduce anxiety. For example, if all the doors are the same colour then how does the person find their bedroom? Putting a familiar object or picture on the door can help the person and reduce their anxiety, as can offering contrasting coloured door frames, handles and rails.

Problems with understanding steps, stairs and changes in the colour of flooring can also cause people with learning disabilities and dementia to become very anxious. We need to reassure people and help them 'over the step' that they see as difficult. Continuous floor colour will help.

Mid stages of dementia

During the mid-stages of dementia, the person will find it increasingly difficult to do tasks for themselves. They feel very stressed, especially if they believe or know that they are failing, e.g. if they put their jumper on back-to-front and we have to change it round. We can prevent stress and anxiety by giving people extra support to make sure that they do not fail. We also need to understand how people are feeling and make sure we reassure them.

During the mid-stages of dementia, the person's long term memory begins to 'roll back' and they forget things that have happened. They may talk about people who have died as if they are still alive, or think that they are younger and living in a different place. Challenging the person's reality will make them very anxious. It is important not to challenge the person but to enter their world and reassure them.

Late stages of dementia

In the late stages of dementia, the focus changes on keeping the person well and making sure all the daily tasks are done with dignity and respect. People at late stages of dementia can become very anxious about being hoisted for bathing, toileting or changing position. This is very common and we need to take our time, explaining to the person what we are going to do before we do it and giving lots of reassurance.