

Anxiety Related to Dementia

The symptoms of dementia often cause a feeling of insecurity. For example, memory loss may lead to worry about forgetting an appointment while visual spatial problems can make people feel lost or disoriented even when they are in a familiar place. Having less ability to cope with stress, people with dementia often become dependent on their caregiver to help them manage their emotions. The caregiver may become the person’s ‘anchor’; or the person they trust who helps them feel secure. The person with dementia might follow or ‘shadow’ the caregiver wherever they go, call the caregiver several times a day on the phone, or ask repeated questions over-and-over again. They may feel threatened and become agitated when their caregiver feels tired and acts frustrated, impatient, or tries to ignore them. Similarly, they may become worried and agitated when they cannot find their caregiver, even for a moment. For example, if the person with dementia cannot see or hear their caregiver, they might wander away looking for them and get lost.

This handout offers some ideas for helping the person with dementia feel secure. If their anxiety is very distressing or puts their safety at risk, their doctor should be consulted to see if medication might help. Antidepressants are generally safe and can help soften anxiety. Stronger medications like benzodiazepines or antipsychotics have more side effects, though in some situations, the benefits of the medication outweigh the potential harm.

IF	THEN
<p>The person is following you around and getting worried or agitated when they cannot see or hear you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reduce clutter and background noise that may make the environment disorienting for the person. ● Set up a ‘control station’ near their favorite chair. Make sure they have a snack, some water, an activity or two (e.g., book, puzzle, craft), and any other ‘security objects’ they prefer (e.g., phone, stuffed animal, purse). ● Consider if the person may need more help or supervision than you are able to provide. Try starting a day program or hiring in-home help. It may take some time but the person will likely adjust to it. ● Reassure the person with a calm tone of voice.

IF	THEN
<p>The person is asking the same questions repeatedly or seeking frequent reassurance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind yourself that the person is not doing this on purpose. They have short-term memory loss or a short attention span and they are doing the best they can. • Use a hearing aid or voice amplifier if hearing loss is an issue. • Avoid using an annoyed tone of voice (“I already told you this.”) as this is likely to make the person feel defensive. • Think of a script that you can repeat without having to think about it. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>That was a lovely breakfast (lunch/dinner). Will you help me rinse the dishes?</i> ○ <i>It was fun talking with you about that silly cat. I will call you again tomorrow morning. Have a nice time at bingo this afternoon.</i> • Try to use a matter-of-fact tone of voice. Use humor if you find that the person responds well to it. • Limit the amount of information you give the person if more information will cause them to worry. For example, you might wait to tell the person about a doctor’s appointment until it is almost time to get ready to go. • Try to set up a predictable and consistent daily routine for the person. This will help them maintain function and know what to expect. • If the person lives in a facility, consider setting up a scheduled time to call or visit them each day. • Keeping a calendar or written daily schedule may be helpful for some people and for others it may cause more confusion. • Giving the person something to do may distract them from worrying. Often people want to be helpful, try to find simple chores they can help with routinely. • Regular exercise may be another outlet for nervous energy. • People with dementia may use your emotions as cues for their own. For example, if you are anxious and worried, they may become anxious and worried. Take a deep breath and try to stay calm.

IF	THEN
<p>The person becomes so distressed they are inconsolable</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take a deep breath and do your best to stay calm yourself • Reduce background noise (turn off television) and dim any bright lights if possible • Sometimes it helps to have another familiar person, like a neighbor or relative call or visit to distract and reassure the person • Arguing with the person or trying to physically restrain them is likely to make the situation worse • If there is any immediate threat of danger to the person or anyone else, call 911 • Contact the person's doctor to make an urgent appointment to rule out an underlying medical cause and consider pharmacologic treatment • If you need help figuring out what to do at any time day or night, call the Alzheimer's Association's 24/7 Helpline at 1-800-272-3900 • If the person responds well to affection, consider holding their hand, giving them a hug, or rubbing their back • Consider distracting the person with their favorite food treat like ice cream or chocolate • Sometimes people feel calmer when riding in the car or going for a walk. Make sure you bring a cell phone just in case you end up needing to call for help to keep the person safe.