

# Dementia and intimate relationships

**C12**



Alzheimer National Helpline

**1800 341 341**

Being emotionally close to other people is an essential and natural part of who we are. It is often our main source of support and wellbeing. This closeness can be shown in many ways, such as sharing your feelings, being comforted when you're sad, or sharing a sexual relationship.

Our relationships with people closest to us, and how we express our feelings to them, naturally change over time. We usually adapt to these changes gradually, as they happen. But if someone you know is diagnosed with dementia, this will trigger changes in their relationships, especially with people who love and care for them.

We all express intimacy in different ways, such as a hug, holding hands, a kiss on the cheek or sex. As changes occur in our lives, it is important that we adapt to these changes. We need to develop new ways of maintaining intimacy and giving each other emotional support.

It is important to understand that changes in the behaviour of a person with dementia are most likely due to the dementia. They often stem from anxiety, fear or frustration and not by anything that you have said or done. Dementia affects every individual differently and we know from research and from experience that the way people behave can change, as dementia progresses. These changes in behaviour can be upsetting for both the person with dementia and people who are caring for them.

## Understanding why a person's behaviour might change

Many things can affect a person's ability to take part in good healthy social and sexual relationships. These include: changes in the brain itself, physical health, mental health and the person's environment.

### Changes in the brain

Successful relationships depend on being able to manage and control your behaviour. For some people with dementia, this ability can vary. Changes in the brain mean they may have difficulty remembering events. They may also:

- Have difficulty in finding words to express their feelings (and they may come out with foul language instead as a sign of frustration)
- Have difficulty showing they want to be intimate or interpreting signs from a partner about intimacy
- Lose their inhibitions or make poor judgements about what is appropriate behaviour
- Have less control over impulses that drive them to say and do inappropriate things when they're with family members or other people
- Have difficulty recognising their partner or identifying other people (for example, mistaking a paid carer for a wife)



- Have difficulty remembering their previous sexual life or history with their partner
- See themselves as younger than they are
- Be confused over when they last had sex with their partner

### Physical health

Changes in a person's physical health may also trigger different reactions. For example:

- A physical illness can affect a person's libido (their sexual drive).
- Side effects of medication can affect libido.
- Infections or conditions such as skin irritation can cause sexual contact to feel uncomfortable or painful. They may also cause inappropriate behaviour.
- Efforts to explain that they need to use the toilet could be misinterpreted as a sexual act.
- Being washed, toileted or dressed by another person may cause arousal, embarrassment or fear.

### Mental health

Changes in a person's mental health can cause changes in their behaviour. These changes in behaviour can include:

- Having delusional beliefs (such as the belief that a partner is being unfaithful)

- Withdrawing from social activity, leading to loneliness or isolation
- Feeling apathy (an absence of emotion, concern or interest)
- Being sensitive to the time of day (there may be more behavioural changes at night)
- Reducing or increasing their interest in sex
- Having less tolerance to alcohol or drugs

### The environment

Our surroundings, or how we are expected to behave in certain settings, can cause difficulties. For example:

- If a person is too hot, or their clothes are uncomfortable, they may try to remove them.
- A person may use inappropriate language or engage in inappropriate sexual behaviour in public spaces.

## Promoting healthy sexuality and intimacy for a person with dementia

Where possible (and appropriate), we should encourage intimacy and healthy sexual behaviour. However, if the way that a person is expressing themselves sexually is causing difficulty, it is important to find ways to help them to express themselves appropriately and safely.

## Things that you could try:

- Encourage alternative ways of showing affection or intimacy. Hugging, holding hands or massage are examples of touching somebody affectionately.
- Take part in shared activities as a way to help couples and families maintain their relationships.
- Share activities such as dancing to encourage appropriate physical contact.
- Take breaks from each other, and also socialise with other people, to help your relationship remain healthy.

## Suggestions for dealing with tricky situations

- If a shared bed is causing problems, consider sleeping in separate beds or rooms.
- If you're washing somebody, cover their groin with a towel while washing other parts of the body and offer them a sponge to wash sensitive areas.
- Consider using two people to carry out personal care tasks.

When choosing a personal care assistant, consideration should be given to the sexual orientation of the carer and of the person with dementia. This can help to determine who is the most appropriate person to provide personal care.

## Play an active part in the local community

Sometimes the person with dementia can behave inappropriately when outside, which can cause distress and embarrassment.

Things that may help:

- Neighbours and friends may not know about the diagnosis. Consider telling selected people, to reduce potential distress or embarrassment.

- Plan outings in advance. For example, if you're going for a meal, ask staff to reserve you a table in a quiet or more private area.
- A person with dementia may show they need to use the toilet by holding their crotch or lifting their dress. Make sure they can go to the toilet regularly when they are out.

## Some important things to consider

- You may think a behaviour is inappropriate. Ask yourself if it really causes a problem and if so, for whom?
- Is the person capable of consenting to sexual activity?
- Can you make sure that a person's sexual orientation is respected?
- Have you tried things that don't involve medication? These are often more effective and should be attempted before any drug treatments. Any medication should be reviewed regularly.

## The importance of sexual health

People can contract sexually transmitted infections at any age. Any itching, rashes, blisters, sores or anything similar around the genitals or anus should be checked by their GP. It is important to practise safe sex, regardless of age.

For more information or for a copy of the resources, call the Freephone Helpline on 1800 341 341 or go to [www.alzheimer.ie](http://www.alzheimer.ie)



## For further information and support

The **Alzheimer National Helpline** is a free and confidential service providing information about dementia, supports and services in your area, and living well day to day. It is run by the Alzheimer Society of Ireland.

**Helpline:** 1800 341 341

(free calls from landlines and mobiles)

Monday to Friday, 10am-5pm. Saturday, 10am-4pm

**Livechat on the website:** [www.alzheimer.ie](http://www.alzheimer.ie)

Monday to Friday, 10am-11am and 3pm-5pm

Saturday, 10am-1pm

**Email:** [helpline@alzheimer.ie](mailto:helpline@alzheimer.ie)

**Website:** [www.alzheimer.ie](http://www.alzheimer.ie)

## Contact a healthcare professional

If the person continues to behave in ways that are difficult to understand, talk to your GP. A GP can make referrals to Specialist Mental Health Services for Older People.

You can also speak to your public health nurse about access to home support, day care and respite care options. You can contact the public health nurse at your local health centre or you can contact the HSE.

**Phone:** 1850 24 1850 (calls are not free)

**Email:** [hselive@hse.ie](mailto:hselive@hse.ie)

**Website:** [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

Talking to a professional counsellor or psychologist can help some people. You can ask your GP about this option. To find out about counsellors in your area, contact:

**Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP)**

**Phone:** 01 230 3536

**Website:** <http://iacp.ie/page>

## Other publications you may find useful include:

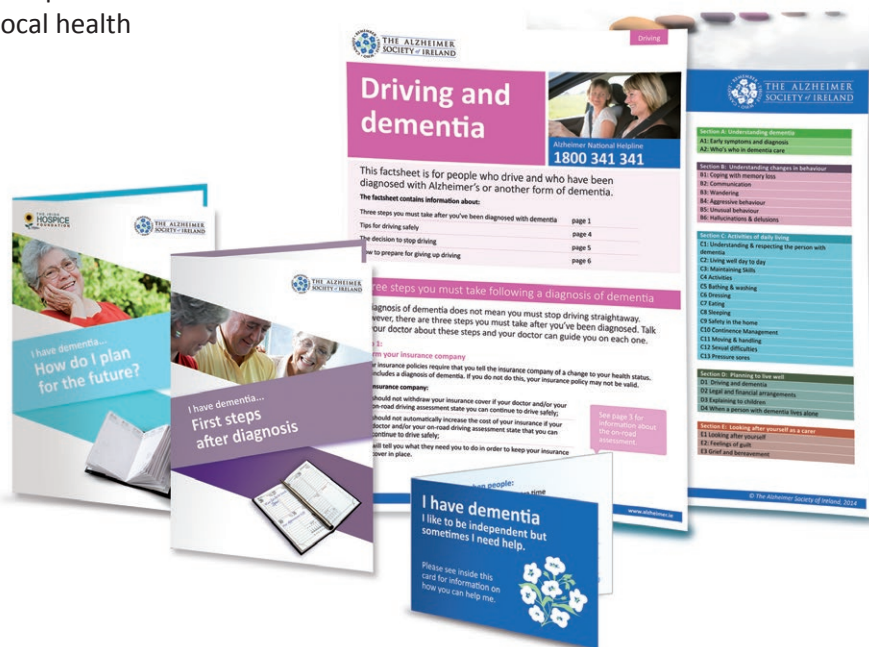
**Practical tips for living well with dementia**

**HelpCard: for people with dementia when out and about**

**Practical steps to support your independence**

**Loss and grief when a family member has dementia**

For a free copy, call  
**1800 341 341**



This information leaflet has been developed with the Dementia Services Information and Development Centre (DSiDC), [www.dementia.ie](http://www.dementia.ie) and the Martha Whiteway Day Hospital, St James's Hospital, Dublin.

A special thank you to the family carers, members of the Dementia Carers Campaign Network who shared their experiences and for their very helpful comments and suggestions.

The Alzheimer Society of Ireland, ASI, has taken great care to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this factsheet. ASI is not liable for any inaccuracies, errors, omissions or misleading information.

**Factsheet: C12**

**Last Updated:** September 2020

**Reviewed by:** Maria McNery Information & Helpline Officer & Matthew Gibb, Director of Dementia Services Information and Development Centre.