



Communication

Help Sheet 2.1

Living with dementia - how the environment, technology and you can help

This help sheet provides information on how assistive technology and environmental adaptation may be used to support communication for people living with dementia.

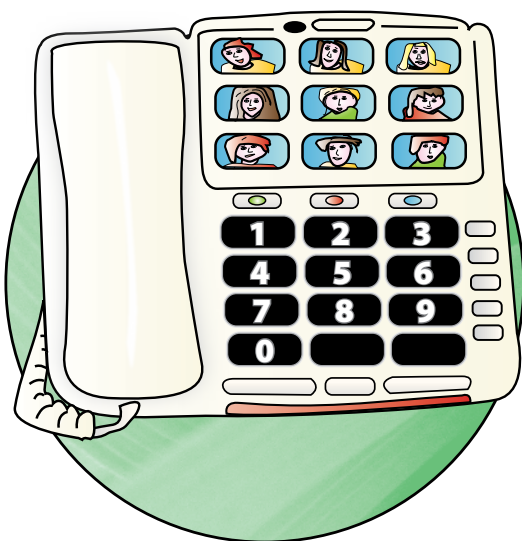
People with dementia can have difficulty finding the right words, remembering what has been discussed or what they have just said. Using the telephone, remembering phone numbers, or calling for help if needed, are examples of how these difficulties can lead to frustration and embarrassment or safety problems for some people. When vision and hearing are also affected, communication difficulties can be made worse.

Person Centred Response

A person living with dementia will experience changes in their ability to interact with other people and their environment over time. It is critical that any decision to change the environment or use technology follows a person-centred assessment, where the perspectives, needs and choices of the person with dementia are understood and respected. It is important to consider that hearing and vision may also be playing a part in how someone is responding to those around them and their environment. Speech Therapists may be able to assist with assessing a person's abilities and needs and developing strategies to support them. What works for some people does not always work for others. It is important to continue to provide ongoing evaluation to ensure that any technology or strategies used for supporting independence and safety in the home remain meaningful to the person and match their needs and abilities.

Environmental Suggestions

- The **Helpful Handbook for Memory Loss** www.ilcnsw.asn.au has advice for keeping things simple, eg using a diary, notebook or noticeboard can assist with communicating important information to you and to others. Not all solutions need to involve complex technology.
- **Signs or labels** on cupboard doors and rooms can assist the person with dementia to locate items or find a room in the house. It is important that signs are clear. If using labels the letters need to be large and contrast with the background, for example black writing on a white background. Placement of signs is important. A sign that is placed too high will not be noticed by a person who is stooped or tends to look downwards.
- An **emergency care card** with family and medical contact details placed near the telephone can be useful for paramedics in case of emergency.
- **Picture cards** of common daily tasks or items that are used regularly, may aid concentration and prompt memory. Picture cards may also support communication when word finding is difficult.



Picture Phone has large buttons, optional one touch dialing which can be personalised by a photograph of the person to be contacted

Simple Technology Suggestions

- **Hearing Amplifier** – a device which increases sound. It is not designed to replace hearing aids. It is available from most electronic stores. It can be carried and is similar in size to a small radio or MP3 player. It has a built in condenser microphone, adjustable high or low range reception and two earphones.
- **Alzheimer's Australia Identity, Early Stage and Companion Cards** are carried by either a person with memory loss or a companion, and communicate important information about the card holder if they are having difficulty communicating. The Early Stage Card is considered particularly useful for people in the early stages of dementia who might need help and understanding at certain times, eg to show a bus driver who is getting impatient. The Companion Card is available to all carers of someone with dementia and helps to explain the person's behaviour that may not be understood. These cards are available at no cost and can be obtained from the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500.
- **Reminiscing** – keeping connected with others as dementia progresses is helped by reminiscing, using life history books and reminiscing games such as *Magic Memories*. Life history books tell the story of a person's life by using photos, newspaper clippings, memorable stories and family history. These resources rely on long term memory and encourage social interaction.
- **Mobile Phones** can be used to maintain communication with carers, family members, or friends. Features vary and may

include one touch dialing, call blocking, bigger buttons and larger screens. Other features can include GPS for finding locations or real time tracing (finding the geographical location such as suburb and street of the person using the phone), calendars with reminders, recording and playback capacity.

- **Reminder Wristwatch** is a watch that can be programmed with messages and vibrating or audible alarms. A reminder watch may help a person with memory loss to keep track of medication, tasks, or appointments.
- **Cue cards** are available in multiple community languages from Eastern Health in Victoria. They are not intended to replace the services of an interpreter. They were developed with the aim of helping both health professionals and carers to communicate with clients and they can be found at www.easternhealth.org.au/index.html.

Advanced Technology Suggestions

- **Smart Caller Blue Phone or Picture Phone** have large easy to operate buttons with the option of one touch dialing which can be personalised by a photo. Some models may include alarms that can be set for medication and meal time reminders.
- **Automated Home Systems** can use wireless or 'hard wiring' technology to operate appliances, lighting, water usage and security in the home as well as communicating this information to call centres. Some systems can monitor when the resident has left their home/when they have returned and notify a carer or call centre if there are changes to a person's regular routine that indicate they could be unwell or injured.



Finding Products

For information about specific products and where to get them, see www.dementiatechnology.org.au Professional assessment is advised before any changes are made or products purchased. To find the best solution for your needs and to avoid unnecessary expense, contact the Independent Living Centre.

Further Information

Technology and the way individuals relate to it are constantly changing. For further information, a dementia friendly home checklist and to view other Help Sheets about how the environment, technology and you can help, please see www.dementiatechnology.org.au or call 1300 275 227 (1300 ASK BCS).

For further information and to discuss your individual needs and:

- assistive technology or home modifications, contact the Independent Living Centre at www.ilcaustralia.org or 1300 885 886;
- dementia, contact The National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500, or Alzheimer's Australia at www.alzheimers.org.au.

For information about local care and support services, including respite for carers, phone Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centres on freecall 1800 052 222*. For emergency respite support outside business hours, phone freecall 1800 059 059* (*Calls from mobile phones are charged at applicable rates).