

How to help a person with dementia who has pain



Background

Many people with dementia have pain. Pain can be different for different people; it can be a physical pain from a sickness like cancer, diabetes or muscle soreness and an emotional pain that might include loss of a family member or being disconnected from their Country.

Why Understand Pain

Pain can change the way a person behaves, their body and their spirit. It is sometimes hard to know if a family member with dementia has pain because they might not want to talk about it, or not want to appear weak, or they cannot talk about it. This information provides family and community with tips to recognise and understand pain, and some ideas that can help.

Identifying Pain

You know your family member, consider pain if your family member is acting differently.

What to look for	What to do
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Walking differently or has different facial expressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Use a checklist to know how bad the pain is. Not answering does not mean they are not in pain. Ask the person “Are you hurting?”, or “Are you sore?”. Point at the spot where the person would usually have pain like lower back and say “Is your back giving you trouble?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Have difficulty moving or is scared to move, or is holding a part of their body	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ If moving is not causing too much pain, encourage them to move as this may help. Not moving can make the pain worse.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Not sleeping well	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Try and keep active during the day, listen to music they like or ask the doctor if they should take pain medication before bed.

Family Carer Helpsheet

■ Not eating as much	■ Prepare small meals they like throughout the day.
■ Are quieter	■ Have someone they trust sit with them to encourage talking. Look at their body language to find out when is a good time to start speaking and give them time to reply.

Keep the body, mind and spirit well

Keep the body, mind and spirit well;

- Pain can cause the person with dementia to become stressed and upset. Do not force the person to do something they don't want to do. Try and have a plan in place when the pain is bad.
- Play some of their favourite music to help them reconnect with culture and language.
- Yarn with them (use cue cards when required).
- Go for a walk.
- Collect bush tucker from country and share a meal.
- Medicines can help with physical pain. Consult with the doctor or Aboriginal Health Worker about medication. Know what pills they are taking. Do not stop any medications suddenly without talking to the doctor.



Family Carer Helpsheet

Case study

Susan was calling out for family, wailing in grief. She had a long history of pain, was blind and had cancer. Originally from the Ernabella Mission in north-west South Australia, she had lived in a large community. When the family could no longer look after her, she was moved to the Mutitjulu Aged Care Service in the Northern Territory, where she was not on Country.

Being off Country was causing a lot of pain and grieving and she constantly called for her husband. Staff tried many things to help her, but they were not from her culture.

A family member, who was a Ngangkari woman, knew what to collect that would remind her of her Country. She collected bush tucker, including bush tobacco and put it in a dilly bag. The woman was able to touch and smell and have safe things to eat from the dilly bag, they sang hymns in APY language, which reminded her of Country.

These things helped Susan, who became more settled and the staff were able to care for her and understand the type of pain she was in better and provide care in a cultural appropriate way.

