

How to support someone living with dementia who is feeling anxious



Background

A person living with dementia may feel anxious due to the pandemic. Stories about COVID-19 consumes media coverage and everyday conversations. This can be frightening for someone living with dementia who may be unaware of the situation or unable to talk about how this makes them feel.

A person living with dementia may also experience feelings of anxiety related to worrying about their own health or the health of others, changes in routine, and being unable to see their family members.

If a person with dementia is anxious, carers may notice a change in their behaviour such as becoming irritable, being unusually quiet, asking for reassurance and not wanting to be alone. Anxiety can also cause unpleasant physical symptoms including shortness of breath, sweating, heart palpitations, stomach ache, headaches.

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If a person is experiencing anxiety in relation to the pandemic, try to offer support in the following ways:

- Some people find animal representation helpful. Stroking and interacting with soft animals can be soothing and provide a person with company.
- Support the person to engage in activities that they find relaxing, this will be different for each person for example: a walk, gardening, foot soak, watching a favourite film, gentle exercise, housework, drawing, reading/audio books, music.
- Where possible support the person to keep to their routine and keep in touch with family and friends using technology and letters, cards and photographs.
- Try a quick, on the spot, relaxation technique for example, encourage the person to take 10 gentle, slow breaths. Doing this together can help the person to follow the breathing exercise.

- Reduce how much the person is hearing and talking about the pandemic. Watch DVDs instead of TV and listen to music CDs or pre-recorded radio shows. Consider sharing 'Good News Newsletters' full of uplifting and positive news stories available from Good News Network.
- Encourage the person to talk about how they are feeling for example, "you seem worried, are you ok?". Smile, show patience and take the time to listen to the person. Validate how the person is feeling and offer reassurance for example, "I can understand why you feel worried. Staff are here to care and protect you".
- Try changing the conversation to support the person engage in an activity, for example "Would you like to help me wipe the tables before lunch. Fish and chips are on the menu today, would you like that?" This can provide distraction from feelings of anxiety.
- Communicate openly and honestly with the person, taking into account their individual communication needs and understanding of the situation. There are picture cards and written information that can support discussions about Coronavirus with people living with dementia available from Australian Aphasia Association (www.aphasia.org.au) and Dementia Australia (www.dementia.org.au).

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DSA continues to support your care home, via our normal referral pathways. **We are considered an 'essential service' for residential care by the Commonwealth Department of Health** and, as such, our Dementia Consultants remain able to visit to provide direct support, or phone or video conference depending on your preference. Regardless of whether your home is in lockdown or not, we are still available to support.