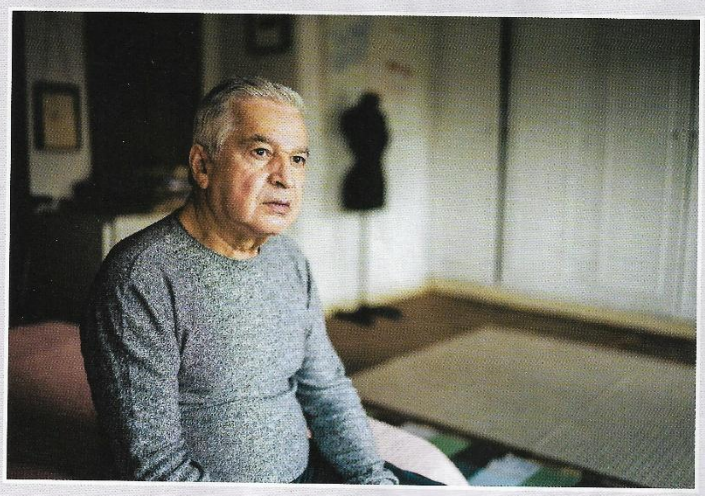
When the fog sets in

When a person you love begins to lose their memory, it can feel as if you're losing them piece by piece – but there are still ways you can reach them, even beyond the mist

Words Emma Green

Few life experiences test the heart quite like dementia – and memory loss is often one of the earliest and most distressing symptoms of the disease. It can start subtly – such as misplacing items – and gradually progress into more profound disorientation and confusion. Over time, those with dementia may forget family members or struggle to complete familiar tasks. These moments can feel like tiny heartbreaks, a thousand small goodbyes that happen long before the final one ever actually arrives.

Although it can feel as if the person we once loved is now unrecognisable, the essence of them still remains. Those living with dementia do not just become empty vessels or fading personalities – their inner emotional experience remains rich, and they continue to feel joy, love, fear and humour, even well into the advanced stages of the disease.



The silver lining here is that we can still maintain a connection with those affected by dementia, but we must be willing to embrace new ways of bonding with them that go beyond the cerebral.

Understanding memory loss in dementia

Dementia is a neurodegenerative condition that progressively damages brain cells, affecting cognitive functions such as memory, reasoning and communication. However, it does not affect the brain uniformly; instead, it spreads through different networks over time. Although the exact course of deterioration depends on the type of dementia involved, they all tend to share a similar pattern in progression.

Dementia tends to have a particularly devastating effect on memory because it damages brain structures responsible for the forming, storage and retrieval of information. The key areas in the brain that are affected include:

- The hippocampus (located in the temporal lobe), which is crucial for forming new memories.
- The frontal lobe, which is responsible for a person's higher-level cognitive

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tasks such as judgment, planning and social inhibition.

- The temporal lobe, which is a key component for memory, as well as processing auditory information and the storage of knowledge.
- The parietal lobe, which is involved in processing sensory information.

Different types of memory are affected at various stages of the disease and the first usually impacted is working memory. Working memory is what enables us to hold onto and manipulate information for seconds to minutes at a time, such as remembering a phone number long enough to dial it. The hippocampus, which helps to encode new information, is often one of the first regions of the brain to deteriorate, particularly in Alzheimer's disease. Encoding is the brain's process of converting new information into lasting memories. When this process breaks down, this information cannot be stored, which then manifests in behaviours such as forgetting recent conversations or mislaying car keys.

Damage to the hippocampus can also impact episodic memory, which is your ability to remember autobiographical experiences, such as things you did, places you went, events that happened and when they happened. Episodic memory is highly dependent on the hippocampus and the surrounding brain regions and as these areas begin to decline, individuals may struggle to recall recent events, such as what they did earlier that day. In the later stages of the disease, they may even be unable to recall significant moments from their

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personal histories, such as their wedding day or childhood.

Prospective memory or remembering to carry out future tasks, such as taking medications, can also be affected early in the disease. This type of memory loss can have a profound impact on someone's ability to manage their daily responsibilities and commitments. Prospective memory not only relies on the hippocampus to hold onto intentions, but it also depends on the prefrontal cortex, which coordinates executive functioning skills such as organisation, concentration and the ability to follow through with tasks. As damage also spreads to the frontal lobes, this can manifest in behaviours such as forgetting to turn appliances off, missing appointments or double-dosing on medication.

As the disease progresses to other regions of the brain, such as the temporal lobes, communication can also begin to be impacted. The temporal lobes contain structures that are critical for storing semantic memory, which is our comprehension of words, objects and concepts. Once damage to the temporal lobes starts to take effect, it can make it difficult for someone to be able to recall certain words, and create an inability to recognise faces or objects, along with a gradual loss of vocabulary and general knowledge.

Deterioration of the parietal lobes can have a significant impact on spatial memory, too. This part of the brain integrates sensory information such as location, distance, direction and layout, allowing us to navigate our surroundings. Impairment in this area can contribute to problems such as getting lost in familiar environments, difficulties following maps or directions and a general feeling of disorientation. It can also make everyday tasks such as cooking, dressing or navigating stairs challenging due to dysfunctions in hand-eye coordination and being unable to accurately judge distances.

Fortunately, there are some types of memory that are preserved for far longer, despite the widespread atrophy that dementia has on the brain. One of these is procedural memory, which is responsible for storing the skills, habits

Stimulating memory with sensory activities

While dementia might steal a person's memories, the senses remain powerful gateways to our personal history. Long after words and logic begin to decline, sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch are able to stir deep emotional responses within someone – and even awaken echoes of the past.

You can utilise sensory experiences as prompts to spark recollection in a loved one or even just to ground them in the present moment by evoking joy and contentment. Try creating a 'comfort box' filled with familiar textures, scents and small objects they may recognise, such as a seashell from their favourite beach, a piece of fabric from their wedding dress or an old perfume bottle.

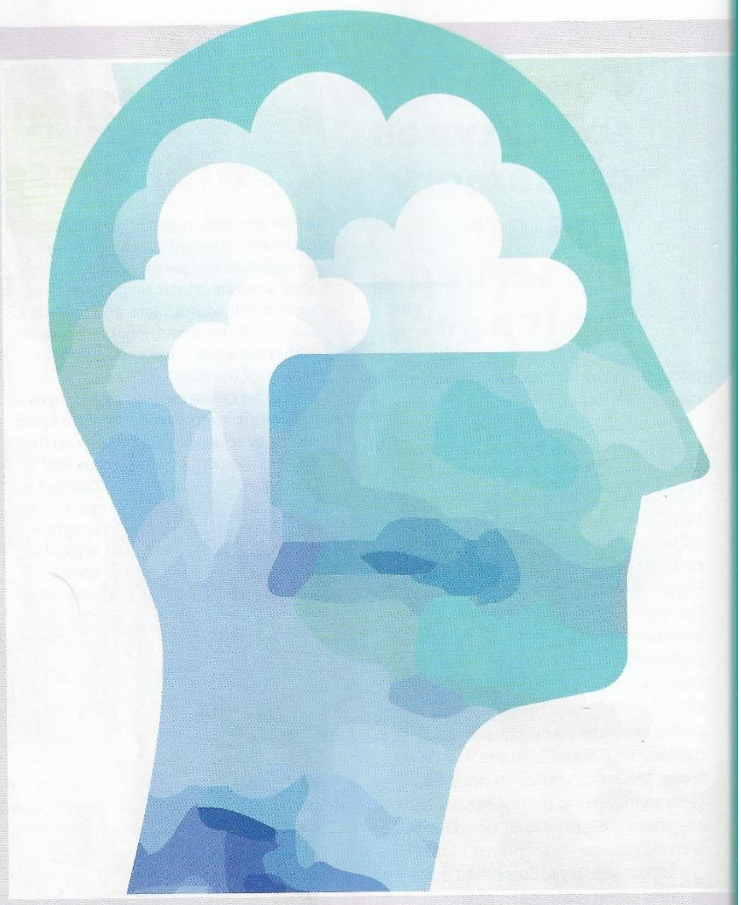
You can also use opportunities such as taking a walk outdoors together to stimulate several of their senses at once, where they can take in the sight of nature, the smell of the earth, the feel of the breeze and the sound of bird song.

Music, perhaps, provides the strongest link to memory as it can reach parts of the brain untouched by dementia, where rhythm and melody can unlock memories that words alone fail to do so. Even when speech is lost, people with dementia can often remember lyrics to songs from their youth or early adulthood. Compiling a personalised playlist together or singing can help to spark joy, movement and even conversation.

Stimulating memory with reminiscence activities

Reminiscence therapy – or the use of memory aids like photos, old keepsakes and storytelling in dementia care – can help to trigger recollection and emotional engagement. Try these examples:

- Display photos with brief information like names and dates labelled on them.
- Sit down with them to create a scrapbook of their favourite people and moments.
- Look back through their old photo albums.
- Let them handle meaningful objects such as letters, medals or important jewellery.
- Watch old films or listen to radio shows of their era.
- Ask gentle, open-ended questions such as 'What was your favourite holiday?' or 'Who did you like to dance with back then?' without pressuring them to remember exact details.
- Encourage participation by saying something like 'You always looked so happy in this picture. Tell me about that day'. Alternatively, 'You could say "I remember when..." and share a story that invites reminiscence without pressure,' says Dr Pritchard.



and actions that we perform automatically without needing to consciously think about them. This is because the brain structures responsible for this type of memory, such as the basal ganglia, decline much more slowly in dementia compared to other parts of the brain. This explains why somebody with dementia might still be able to perform tasks like playing the piano or riding a bike because these skills, particularly if attained long ago, are stored deep within the brain.

"Somebody might still be able to perform tasks like playing the piano"

Another type of memory that typically stays intact is emotional memory, which is responsible for storing the feelings associated with past experiences. This is because the amygdala, which is involved in the emotional tagging of memories, is generally affected later in Alzheimer's than the hippocampus. Someone with dementia may forget the factual details of a visit, such as who came to see them and what was said, but they will feel the emotional effects of said visit and how you made them feel, whether that's warmth, agitation or frustration.

The good news is that we can put this insight to practical use by learning new ways of communicating with our loved ones that engage the sensory and emotional functions of their brain rather than the cognitive. The following

provides a springboard for cultivating this skill by exploring how to approach common dilemmas you might face while caring for a loved one.

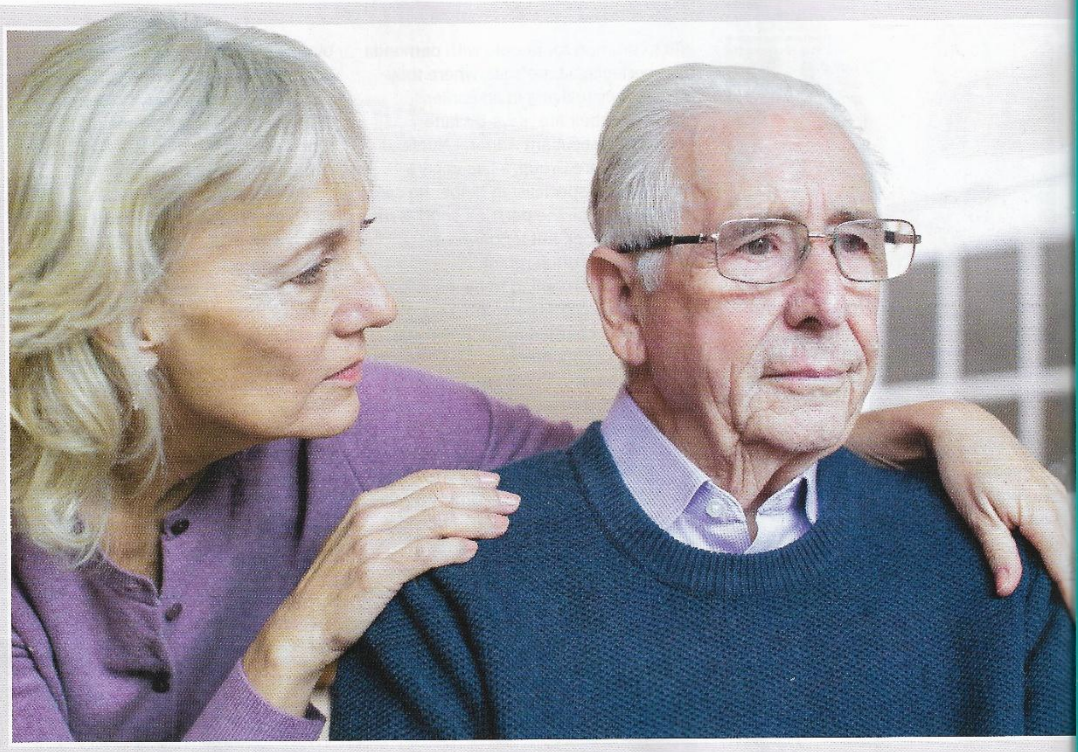
Mental regression

As the disease progresses, the boundaries between past and present blur. Your mother may believe she's still raising her children, or your spouse might think they need to get ready for work, despite retiring years ago.

'It's common for people with dementia to experience a time shift, where they believe they're living in an earlier chapter of their life,' says Dr Jane Pritchard, Consultant Admiral Nurse at The Good Care Group, a live-in care provider and specialist in dementia care. 'This is because the person's short-term memory is poor, but longer-term memories are often retained.'

The brain, struggling to fill in the gaps, reaches backward to the most vivid, emotionally charged memories it still retains. Those moments can be a source of comfort and stability when the present feels uncertain. However, for family and friends, this lapse can be unsettling to witness, and they may be tempted to correct them or try to bring them back to the present. Unfortunately, all this does is contribute to confusion and distress. 'If someone asks for a parent who has passed away or wants to go to a childhood home, responding bluntly with "No! They're not here anymore" or even "I'm so sorry but they have passed away" may be deeply distressing, especially when done repeatedly as the grief they feel is continuous,' says Dr Pritchard.

One of the ethical dilemmas caregivers may face is whether to go along with their loved one's delusions. The key question is whether correction will bring them comfort or further confuse them. If a belief is harmless, then it is generally advisable to play along. Instead of trying to argue with them, try stepping into their world and meeting them where they are. If they think it's 1985, gently go along with it. In dementia care, this is often referred to as therapeutic fibbing or validation therapy. The goal isn't to purposely deceive them, but to preserve their dignity and peace of mind. Compassion, not correction, is your best moral compass here. However, if a false belief



is causing them agitation, such as wrongly being convinced that somebody is trying to steal from them, then it is better to calmly reassure them with the truth. This should also be applied if their safety might potentially be at risk, such as wanting to leave the house or go out driving alone.

Another way to put validation therapy into action is to acknowledge the emotions behind their remarks. If your father keeps asking to see his long-deceased parents, you might say, 'You miss them. They loved you very much,' without needing to cause further distress by reinforcing the reality of the situation. 'Often, these questions reflect an underlying need such as comfort, security or affection,' says Dr Pritchard. 'You might say, "Tell me what you remember about them," and use that as a way to connect.' After validating their feelings, you can then gently redirect them back to the present moment with a soothing distraction such as a cup of tea or listening to their favourite music.

Stimulating memory with purposeful activities

Purpose doesn't just disappear with memory. Simple, repetitive tasks can give someone with dementia a sense of satisfaction, as well as some autonomy. Participating in meaningful activities can also enhance both mood and cognitive function. 'Hands-on activities like gardening, folding laundry or baking simple recipes can provide comfort,' says Dr Pritchard. 'These experiences aren't about restoring memory; they're about providing joy, familiarity and a sense of purpose in the present moment.'

It is important that any activity should focus on engaging the senses rather than intellect and that it resonates with the person's interests and abilities. It could be something as simple as colouring, potting plants, or even kneading dough. The overall goal here is engagement, not attainment - what matters most is that the task at hand helps to foster focus and calm.

Handling repeated questions and stories

Repetition is one of dementia's most common hallmarks and can test even the most patient of hearts. As difficult as it might be, try to respond calmly to repeated questions, even if it is the tenth time they've asked that day. Avoid saying things like 'I already told you'. While frustration is normal, it's important to reset before irritation turns into guilt. Take breaks when needed or step into another room briefly and take a few deep breaths before returning. Remind yourself that for them, repetition equates to reassurance.

'It's helpful to consider what the repeated question might be signalling,' says Dr Pritchard. 'Asking "Is it bedtime?" may mean they're tired or overwhelmed. A need for comfort might be behind a desire to see a parent, or a need for security might present as asking about a previous house. Providing comfort and security in a different way can then meet this need.'

If a question keeps looping, shift their attention to another activity, such as asking them to help you set the table for lunch. Using visual reminders like a whiteboard or a calendar with key information displayed (eg, 'Today is Wednesday – Lunch is at noon') can also help to reduce repetitive questions.

When it comes to recurrent stories, listen as if you're hearing them for the first time. These stories are touchstones that your loved one clings to for comfort. By showing interest, you allow them to hold onto these pieces of their identity that have yet to be erased.

When a loved one doesn't recognise you

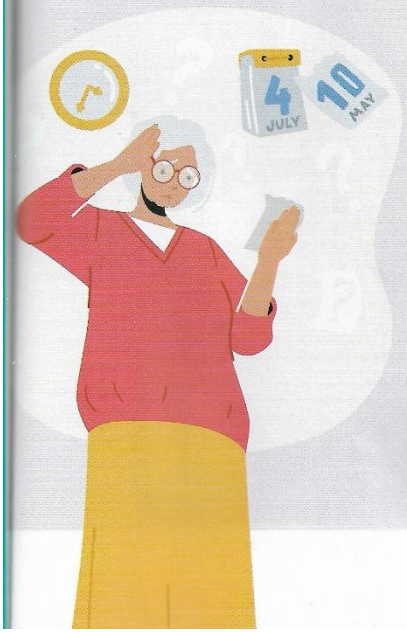
Nothing cuts quite as deeply as when someone you love looks at you with confusion and no longer knows who you are – or mistakes you for someone else entirely. These moments can feel like a punch to the chest, but it doesn't mean the bond between the two of you has vanished. They might not recall your name or the nature of your relationship, but they can still sense whether you're someone who makes them feel loved and safe.

As hard as it might be, try to avoid correcting them or showing any hurt. Instead, gently reintroduce yourself by saying something like, 'Hi, I'm Sarah. I've come here to spend some time with you.' This approach re-establishes connection without confrontation. Smile, hold their hand (only if they're comfortable with it) and speak to them in a soothing tone.

'The way we speak to someone with dementia can either reduce anxiety or accidentally heighten it,' says Dr Pritchard. 'Phrases like "Do you recognise me?" or "Remember when...?" can unintentionally put pressure on the person and make them feel embarrassed or like their memory is being tested.'

Dementia challenges everything we think we know about connection, yet it can also teach us a different truth: that love is not dependent on memory. Emotional qualities like our touch, voice and patience remain a powerful anchor in a person's ever-shifting world and can still reach the heart, even when words fail. We may not be able to restore their memories, but we can still create new moments and opportunities for comfort and bonding.

> **"Emotional qualities like our touch, voice and patience remain a powerful anchor"**



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