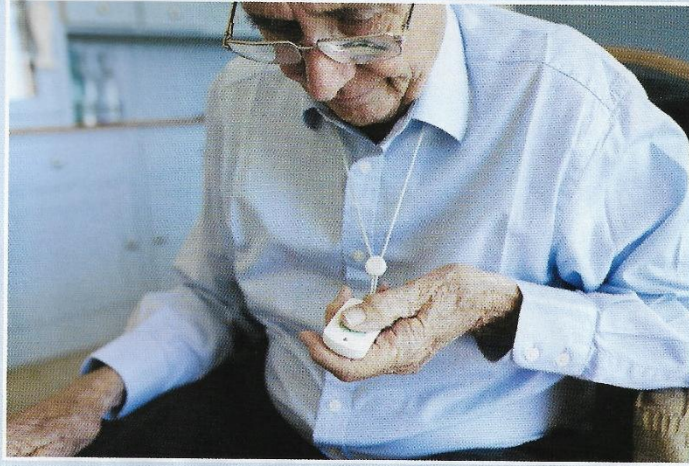


A new normal

Dementia may present additional challenges, but with careful planning and small adjustments, it is possible to preserve autonomy and quality of life for the foreseeable future

Words Emma Green





Receiving a dementia diagnosis, for both the person affected and their loved ones, can be utterly devastating. We are now faced with a myriad of emerging challenges that can affect daily life as we know it: fading memory, a profound loss in cognitive skills and unsettling changes in personality and behaviour. Despite this, many people with dementia continue to live independently, work, socialise, maintain long-standing hobbies and participate in family life.

The early stages of the disease are both a time for adaptation and profound possibility. By creating a new life that compensates for cognitive changes rather than fights against them, those with dementia can continue to thrive - while prolonging the need for more intensive help.

The importance of designing a supportive living environment

The home plays a major role in helping someone with dementia to feel secure. 'Some people can function really well in their own environment, especially when it's somewhere they've lived for the last 40 years,' says Caroline Clifton, an Admiral Nurse with Belong Villages, a

non-profit dementia specialist operator of care villages and services. Alongside fellow Admiral Nurse Bridget Lawler, they work in partnership with the charity Dementia UK to support families during the dementia journey. 'It's only when they are taken out of their environment that they may start to struggle,' she continues. Even small tweaks to the layout, organisation and fittings can transform the home from a place of possible confusion into a reassuring, intuitive space.

Cognitive overload is common with dementia and clutter is one of the biggest sources of this. As the condition advances, navigating messy rooms becomes increasingly difficult and too much 'visual noise' can make it harder to focus, find items or move around safely. Keeping surfaces and pathways clear of unnecessary objects, establishing zones in the house - such as a designated place for post - and scaling back on décor and busy patterns can help to reduce this overwhelm.

As important as it is to simplify a living space, it is equally crucial that the house doesn't become bereft of all personality and warmth and still maintains some familiarity. Displaying sentimental personal items, mementoes and photos can help to maintain a sense of identity and a connection to their past life.

Another common challenge associated with dementia is orientation.



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“Visual prompts can reduce reliance on memory and remove the guesswork from everyday tasks”

‘With Alzheimer’s disease, particularly, there are problems quite early on with wayfinding,’ says Caroline. ‘So, you might need to use signage or labels to guide somebody around the house to remind them where things are kept.’ Visual prompts such as pictures, signs and colour-coding can reduce reliance on memory and remove the guesswork from everyday tasks. You could try labelling rooms, drawers and cupboards with words or pictures (eg ‘Toilet’, ‘Dishes’, ‘Clothes’), use colour-coded storage bins or place sticky notes at certain points in the house, such as a note saying ‘Remember to turn off the gas’ next to the hob. Colour contrast can also be used as a visual cue. Using a

brightly coloured mug or a darker meal tray, for example, can make it easier to distinguish objects from their surroundings. Using different colours for doors, furniture and bannisters that contrast with the walls and floors can also help them to stand out.

If an appliance like a washing machine or television breaks, try to get it repaired or buy a new one in the same style as what they had before. ‘If possible, it is probably better to just get a replacement of the same appliance as they’ll be more likely to retain how they used to use it, whereas they might struggle to learn how to use a different



one,' says Caroline. She also suggests substituting some household items for the kind of model they may have used when they were younger. 'Sometimes you might find people putting electric kettles on the stove because when they were growing up, they used a gas kettle that would whistle,' explains Caroline. 'So, it might be good to go back to that if that's the case.'

Lighting is an often-underestimated tool in establishing a secure home environment. Dementia can affect depth perception, making shadows seem threatening, or objects appear distorted, and uneven lighting and dark hallways can be both frightening and a safety hazard. Introducing increased natural light, motion-activated night lights and bright, uniform lighting in key areas such as the stairs, bathrooms and kitchen, can reduce the risk of falls and minimise the misinterpretation of glares, shadows and reflections.

Adding safety features can further reduce the risk of accidents. In the early stages of dementia, these measures are often preventative rather than of immediate necessity, but they can help someone to remain feeling confident in their own home, particularly if mobility is an issue. This may include installing door alarms, an outdoor key safe, grab bars near toilets and showers, non-slip mats, stable shower chairs and raised toilet seats. It is also important to consider flooring, too. Remove rugs or mats that can easily be tripped over, and if possible, avoid shiny floors, carpets that match the colour of the walls or are a colour that could be mistaken for something else, such as grass or water.

How a steady routine can help

One of the most effective interventions you can introduce is the establishment of a daily routine. When dementia disrupts memory, attention and executive function - making even the most basic of tasks arduous - structure can provide some much-needed stability. A routine may not eliminate all the challenges that dementia can bring,



The power of an environment that 'holds' information

Memory aids come in many forms, but the most effective ones share three qualities: simplicity, visibility and consistency. The right tools can bridge the gaps caused by memory lapses and create habits before memory difficulties progress.

Written aids

'People with dementia tend to write things down a lot as this is their way of coping initially,' says Caroline. Low-tech aids like large-print wall calendars, whiteboards for routines, along with reminders and sticky notes placed in key locations provide quick and clear visual prompts. Keeping a handy list of

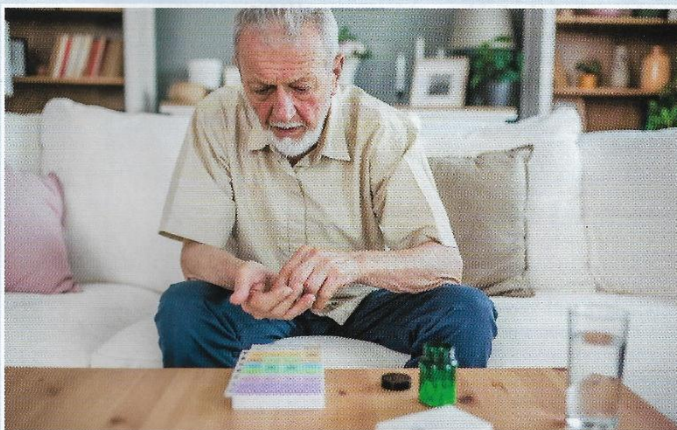
emergency contacts next to the phone can also be useful.

Organisational systems

A memory aid is only useful if it's consistently implemented. Try to keep everyday items in the same place - for example, a bowl by the door for keys, a basket to store glasses and hearing aids and a drawer just for medication.

Medical management

Weekly pill organisers, blister packs and automatic pill dispensers with alarms reduce the risk of missed or repeated doses. This is vital as medication regimens become more complex.





Harness the power of technology

Digital aids can provide valuable assistance when used thoughtfully, but the key is simplicity: tools should reduce stress, not add to it. Technology works best when it is introduced early and before cognitive changes make learning new skills more difficult. 'There is so much out there, and it's developing all the time,' says Caroline. 'I have seen some of the apps and tools that are used by families, and it just works so well.' These may include:

Voice assistants (Alexa, Google Assistant)

These devices can:

- Answer orientation questions such as 'what day is it?'
- Set reminders
- Play radio, music or audiobooks
- Offer some companionship as well as reassurance

Smart home devices

- Automatic lighting can reduce falls
- Smart plugs can switch appliances off automatically
- Video doorbells can help to identify visitors
- Smart thermostats can maintain comfortable temperatures without manual adjustment

GPS trackers

Devices such as smartwatches or pendants with location features can give families peace of mind without restricting independence. These tools are especially useful for people who enjoy going out for walks.

Apps that can support daily life

- Medication reminders
- Spoken notifications
- Family messaging apps to help coordinate support
- Timers
- Movement monitors
- Shared calendars



but it can create a calmer, more predictable world during a time of upheaval and confusion.

Repetitive patterns, such as walking the dog after breakfast or doing light exercises in the afternoon, can turn overwhelming tasks into intuitive habits, requiring less recall or cognitive effort. A predictable rhythm can help to bolster independence because the person affected can rely on automaticity and learned patterns to guide their day, reducing prompting from others. It also helps to reduce the number of decisions they might need to make throughout the day.

However, being able to stick to a schedule can be much easier said than done, especially when you are the primary caregiver and have other obligations to contend with. 'It can be difficult for a carer or a family member who is essentially doing the job of three people, and has no one to pass it onto,' says Caroline.

'They might have to spend all morning getting someone washed, dressed and ready for an early appointment, but the more you rush someone with dementia, the more anxious they become, and when they feel rushed, they can't function properly,' adds Bridget.

The unpredictable nature of the disease itself can also prove to be an obstacle in establishing consistency. 'One day is never the same as the next with dementia,' says Bridget. 'Sometimes they may be feeling slightly under the weather or might develop a urinary tract or chest infection, which sets them back.'

'It's not so much routine that's important, rather than establishing familiarity,' adds Caroline. Routines do not need to be rigid - a consistent yet flexible approach that accommodates any potential unanticipated changes usually works best. Some ways of doing this might include:

- Aiming to keep daily tasks, such as mealtimes and medication, in the same order where possible.
- Anchoring tasks to existing habits or natural cues, such as 'after breakfast' or 'before the evening news', rather than a strict time frame (eg 11 am).




“Something as simple as eating and drinking becomes much more difficult with dementia”

- Keeping the mornings structured, as these routines set the tone for the entire day.
- Using visual reminders like a wall-mounted schedule or whiteboard to reinforce the day's activities.
- Avoiding any unnecessary disruptions to the day where possible, especially if the person is tired or overwhelmed.
- Incorporating enjoyable activities into the routine as well as practical ones. Reading, gardening, music, crafting or social visits can all help to maintain mood and cognitive health.

Dementia-friendly kitchens and their role in daily life

Something as simple as eating and drinking becomes much more difficult with dementia - someone might forget to eat, their motivation to cook dwindles or following recipes becomes much too perplexing. There are numerous factors to consider as to why someone with dementia might struggle to eat. 'Some people lose their appetite because they can't taste or smell things like they used to, or their brain isn't telling them that they're hungry,' says Caroline.



Other times, they may not eat because they lose skills in being able to prepare food or even recognising food at all. 'Some days they might be able to use the microwave, whereas the next day, they might not,' explains Bridget. 'Even when families put sandwiches in the fridge, they might not recognise it as a sandwich, so it stays in there. It's not that they don't want to eat it - it's just that they don't know what to do with it.'

In other cases, there may be concern that a loved one is eating too much of the wrong thing. 'With some dementias, you develop a taste for sweet things,'



“Opt for meal delivery services, batch-cooking or stocking up on ready meals that can be quickly heated”

says Caroline. 'They might have been somebody that always watched what they ate, and then all of a sudden, they're eating cake like there's no tomorrow, and that's because of the damage to the brain.' She urges caregivers not to panic, though. 'Don't worry if they aren't eating a well-balanced diet every day,' she continues. 'It doesn't matter as long as they're eating. It's better that they eat jam doughnuts all day and get the calories than eat nothing at all.'

Another element that should be taken into account is any potential hazards that the kitchen might pose. 'It's things like forgetting to turn the gas off, leaving

the tap on or letting the pan boil dry,' says Caroline, 'but there are things that can be put in place like flood and heat detectors and even alarms that can remind them to switch off the pan.'

Here are some small ways to support sustenance and safe meal preparation:

- Simplify meals where possible. Opt for meal delivery services, batch-cooking or stocking up on ready meals that can be quickly heated up in the microwave. 'There's nothing wrong with a good ping meal,' says Caroline.
- Keep food visible. 'If they're living on their own and you're worried about

them not eating, just leave things on the work surface that they can pick at, like cheese or tomatoes,' says Caroline.

- If they're not eating, try sweetening their food up with honey or sugar. 'All the things that we would normally try to avoid, such as full-fat yoghurts, are what you should be giving to someone with dementia, especially if they're losing weight,' says Caroline. Soft foods, finger foods and simple snacks can also provide nourishment when full meals feel overwhelming.
- Dehydration is common with dementia and can worsen cognitive symptoms. Leaving out water jugs and providing juices, soups and fruits with high water content can help to maintain their hydration levels.
- Improve kitchen safety. Installing the right safeguards, such as stove guards, automatic kettles and timers, can make cooking still possible in the early stages of dementia, especially if this was something they once enjoyed doing.

Striking a balance between micromanaging and safety

While being prepared early into the dementia journey can certainly enable a person's independence and reduce risk, it is also important not to remove their autonomy. 'You shouldn't be in a rush to take over too soon because that will just serve to frustrate them,' says Caroline. 'Focus more on quality of life. If someone is coping day-to-day, maintaining their weight, getting all their basic needs met and seems happy and content, why change it?'

She says that we must learn to lower any expectations we might have of the person diagnosed with dementia and look for the small wins, even if that means they're not as clean or tidy as they once were. 'You need to keep focusing on what the person can do, not what they can't,' Caroline explains. 'Someone might not be able to get



The power of simplifying admin

Managing bills, paperwork and appointments becomes much harder as dementia progresses, and mistakes or lapses can have some serious consequences. Early-stage planning and simplification will remove any future stress and protect a person's wellbeing, both financially and practically.

Set up direct debits

Automating routine bills like utilities, phone, or mortgage eliminates the risk of missed payments.

Condense paperwork

Create a single, easy-to-access folder for important documents such as bills,

insurance and medical papers and identification. Reduce paperwork where you can and redirect statements to a trusted relative if appropriate.

Streamline banking

Using contactless payments, limiting credit cards or switching to simplified accounts can reduce complexity. You can also enable phone or online banking, which can provide additional support.

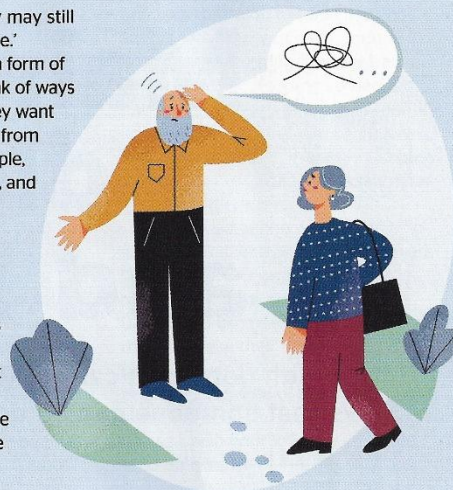
Plan for the future

Discussions about lasting power of attorney or advance care arrangements are best held early, while the person involved can still make informed decisions.

washed and dressed, but they may still be able to do a full shop online.'

View your role as providing a form of supported independence. 'Think of ways where they can still be who they want to be without taking that away from them,' says Caroline. 'For example, most men like to carry a wallet, and I would say keep that going if that's part of their identity. Sometimes, families stop that person from carrying cash because they're worried it will make them vulnerable, but this just belittles them.'

Proactive preparation is not about anticipating future decline, but enabling someone with dementia to live a full life for many years to come.



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