

Communication Skills

4



Helping People with Dementia

**PART OF THE 'FIRST 33
HOURS' PROGRAMME FOR
NEW VOLUNTEERS AT
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY
HOSPITAL.**

Inspired by *Brief Encounters* by
Joy Bray, Marion Janner and Nic
Higham and *Barbara's Story* by
Guys and St Thomas' NHS
Foundation Trust

Adapted for CUH Volunteers by
Anna Ellis.



Communication Skills for New Volunteers

Helping People with Dementia

Volunteers are placed on care of the elderly wards, as it is our elderly patients who are most at risk of social isolation, anxiety and loneliness.

Many elderly patients have dementia – some have a diagnosis, others do not. Dementia describes different brain disorders that trigger a loss of brain function. There are many different types of dementia with Alzheimer’s disease the most common, affecting 62% of those diagnosed. Other types of dementia include vascular dementia affecting 17% and mixed dementia around 10%. The Alzheimer’s Society predict that by 2015 there will be 850,000 people with dementia in the UK, and 2 million by 2051.

You’ll find lots of useful information about dementia on the Alzheimer’s Society website:

www.alzheimers.org.uk

You may also find it very helpful to watch the video produced by Guys and St Thomas’ Hospital called Barbara’s Story, follow the link here:

www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/education-and-training/staff-training/Barbaras-story.aspx

Click on Barbara, the whole story – it’s a YouTube link. You may find that watching this video really helps you to connect to the patient’s point of view. It’s likely to make you cry as well as think, so watch it at an appropriate time. The

video is just over 30 minutes long. If you want to talk to a member of the Voluntary Services team after watching the video, just ask for a one to one and say you've watched Barbara's Story. This video is also shown at intervals for staff and volunteers are welcome – dates will be displayed on the volunteer notice board in Voluntary Services.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Volunteers may be called to respond to questions and statements from confused elderly patients such as 'Where are my parents?', 'I'll be late for work!' and 'why are they keeping me here, I need to pick up my children?'

A helpful approach used by staff in the hospital is **VERA** – this stands for:

V = validate, accepting that the behaviour exhibited has a value to the person and isn't just a symptom of dementia.

E = emotion, paying attention to the emotional content of what the patient is saying.

R = reassure, this can be as simple as saying 'okay' or just being there.

A = activity, see if you can engage the person in an activity that will help them to feel occupied and active.

Volunteers may also be involved in helping people with dementia attend outpatients' clinics and appointments by guiding them to where they need to be.

Attitude/approach

- Try to help the patient to feel good about themselves, motivated to talk and confident in your desire to support them.
- Smile as much as possible to indicate that you are friendly and helpful.
- Use their memory of the past – talk about the subjects they mention, don't bring things into the present.
- People with dementia are not children, they have decades of experiences, skills, relationships and achievements and it is important to respect this.
- Try not to interrupt someone with dementia when they are talking or trying to talk because they are likely to lose their train of thought. You can, though, help out with an occasional word or phrase if you think this will help ease frustration and distress.

- Make sure you face the person when speaking to them.
- Think about your tone of voice – people with dementia usually remain highly sensitised to tone of voice.
- Don't shout! Use a low-pitched voice if you can.
- Don't remind the patient that they've forgotten.
- Respond to the feelings rather than the words. Be patient and cheerful and reassuring. Go with the flow.
- Leave the room, if necessary, to avoid confrontations.



Memory Loss

People with dementia have memory loss. It is a disability. They cannot remember and they cannot remember that they cannot remember. If they ask the same questions over and over they will believe it is the first time they've asked.

Behaviours

People with dementia do not hide things; they protect things by putting them in a safe place and then forgetting that they've done so.

People with dementia are often scared, particularly when they're in hospital. They may become passive, uncooperative, hostile, angry, agitated, verbally abusive or physically combative. Anxiety may make them want to follow someone. They can't remember your reassurances. Keep saying them.

Volunteers can play a vital role in helping people with dementia feel safe. Please see Ward volunteer skills builder 3 – activities with patients – for ideas about activities and diversions.