



Parks and Recreation

Parks and recreation have a major role to play in welcoming people living with dementia by supporting individuals to remain a vital part of the community through staying active, being creative, exploring nature, volunteering, and staying connected with others.



What is Dementia?

Dementia is an overall term that describes a wide range of symptoms associated with a decline in memory or other thinking skills severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities. Dementia has many causes. Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia, is a disease of the brain that leads to changes with memory, thinking, and behavior. Alzheimer's and other dementias are not a normal part of aging.

Early signs of Dementia

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Challenges in planning or solving problems
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
- New problems with words in speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood and personality

Dementia-Friendly Communication

- Treat the person with dignity and respect.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Use a gentle and relaxed tone.
- Use shorter simple sentences, and ask one question at a time.
- Avoid arguing with or embarrassing the person.
- Encourage nonverbal communication.
- Be aware of your body language: smile and make eye contact at eye-level.
- Seek to understand the person's reality and feelings.
- Apologize and redirect to another environment or topic as needed.

How Could Dementia Affect Someone's Participation?

The effects of dementia differ from person to person, but someone living with dementia may:

- Find it difficult to navigate the area – for example, difficulty recognizing places, unclear signage, patterns or shiny surfaces being disorienting, fear of getting lost, difficulty with maps, and not knowing where to go for help.
- Worry about other people's reactions – for example, people not understanding their difficulties, not following social cues, staff not being confident to help or the reaction of security staff to unusual behavior.
- Experience challenges with sequencing steps within a task – for example, difficulty remembering the steps involved in activity or instruction, or getting steps in the wrong order.
- Find it easier to interact during programs using their senses – for example, by looking at visuals, handling objects or listening to sounds in the environment.
- Be concerned about what to expect – for example, not knowing who to ask or speak to for additional support, thinking about how loud it might get or not knowing the ability level of the activity.
- Have other health issues alongside dementia – such as, impaired hearing or mobility challenges that could affect their ability to get around your environment or appreciate the programming.

Making Your Parks and Recreation Area & Services Dementia-Friendly

- **Be Proactive:** Identify the needs and wishes of people living with dementia, their families and care partners; think about how you can meet these needs.
- **Make it Visual:** Within a space such as a park, certain features including planting, sculptures or benches can also help users orientate themselves. Where signs are not appropriate or desired, different types of waymarkers can be used to aid wayfinding. These may be particularly helpful at entrances and exits as well as path junction points. For example, where a path bends around a corner, visual cues can provide reassurance and information as to where it leads. It is necessary to consider what is appropriate for a specific environment, including the character of the place, and the needs of the users.
- **Raise awareness:** Make sure your staff and volunteers understand dementia, how it can affect people's ability to access your environment and services.
- **Know Before You Go:** It is advisable to inform patrons in advance of the kind of facilities available on site. Knowing what to expect upon arrival can be reassuring and helps people to prepare for potential issues, thus reducing barriers to access. Consider creating a dementia-friendly designed leaflet or putting up an information board by the entrance.
- **Include Time to Connect:** Within the recreational activities, design opportunities for socializing and respite for both people living with dementia and care partners (if applicable).
- **Use Dementia-Friendly Language:** People living with dementia are individuals first. Their diagnosis should not be treated as the defining aspect of their life. Terms such as 'sufferer' and 'victim' should not be used to describe people living with dementia. The following terms and phrases should be used:
 - a person/people living with dementia
 - a person/people with a diagnosis of dementia/cognitive impairment
 - a person/people affected by dementia.
- **Nothing About Us Without Us:** Involve people living with dementia when you develop a new dementia-friendly recreational activity or environment.
- **Make Connections:** Contact organizations that support people living with dementia and care partners to explore opportunities for consultation, training, or collaborative projects.
- **Keep it Simple:** Small changes, such as, having extra volunteers on hand, providing a quiet space, or giving people more detailed information before they visit can make a big difference.

Incorporating Dementia-Friendly Program Elements

Key Actions:

- Look at what you already offer and build in dementia-friendly practices, such as adaptations to make existing physical activities dementia-friendly.
- Consider offering services to help people remember their chosen activity – for example, text reminders, a phone call on the day, calendar stickers or appointment cards.
- Engage with local organizations who serve individuals living with dementia by talking to them about the opportunities, services and programming you offer.
- Take time to plan and monitor your programs, and to learn from feedback along the way.
- Review your online and offline communication channels to ensure the messages are clear and easy to understand for people affected by dementia. The Alzheimer's Society website has tips and information [HERE \(https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/symptoms-and-diagnosis/symptoms/communicating-and-dementia\)](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/symptoms-and-diagnosis/symptoms/communicating-and-dementia)

Consider ways to compliment your programming with activities and design specifically for people living with dementia:

Gardening

- Hold a talk or reminiscence session for participants to talk about their favorite flowers, what they used to grow, what involvement they had in the garden, which can often open up to other memories. Conversation prompts or memory boxes with random items from museums or libraries which offer tactile stimulus for conversation. Picture books, photos, items and prompts could be used.
- Hold table top activities – for example, sowing seeds; potting up herbs or taking and planting cuttings; flower arranging or pressing flowers; using leaves to make prints or greeting cards.
- Provide opportunities for pleasant sensory experiences. Sensory gardens of different kinds are increasingly popular and can provide many benefits to people living with dementia. According to Sensory Trust a sensory garden is “a self-contained area that concentrates a wide range of sensory experiences.” This can be achieved through varying surface materials and using planting with a variety of colors, scents and sounds. These may aid remembrance as well as provide talking points. Planting should be chosen to provide year-round interest, and plants that attract birds and wildlife are not only beneficial for biodiversity but can add to people's enjoyment of outdoor spaces.
- Specially adapted tools and equipment can enable independent gardening. This could be lightweight tools with wide handles which are easiest to grip, long-handled tools, sticky palm gardening gloves, and easy-grip tools.

Physical Activity/Fitness

- Plan shorter classes or include breaks so that activities are not too tiring or overwhelming. Support people to go at their own pace and take part in activities they enjoy.
- Provide information about the program in dementia-friendly formats – for example, session outlines with timings and photos, specific access information for each activity and general information (suggested clothing and contact details).
- Make sure gym equipment is clearly labeled with information on how to use it safely, potentially with a notice that states ‘if you need help with any equipment please ask a gym instructor before use’.
- Clearly identify areas where people can get water or go to the toilet.
- Consider whether music is necessary in the facility. Could it be switched off at certain times that are promoted as part of a ‘relaxed’ activity time?

Swimming

- Improve signage and access by marking footsteps or wayfinding on the floor to direct people to the changing room and the swimming pool.
- Build social activities into the swimming program to promote connections.
- Encourage care partners (if applicable) to meet during the sessions, to provide peer support.

Creating a Dementia-Friendly Physical Space

Outdoor activity can provide both social and mental health benefits and improve physical wellbeing. It also facilitates social interaction and plays an important role in people remaining active within the wider community. However, sometimes being able to access and use spaces can be challenging, and efforts are needed reduce barriers to accessing the outdoors. Small changes in a physical space can make a big difference in making an environment feel safe to someone living with dementia. A welcoming environment (both indoors and outdoors) helps a person living with dementia continue to participate in activities they enjoy. There are best practices you can consider to improve access for people living with dementia. Most are relatively low cost and can benefit everyone!

- Entrances should be clearly visible and understood as an entrance. Make sure that glass doors are clearly marked.
- Signage for finding your way around should be clear, use bold type, and have contrast between the words and the background. Alongside text, use a range of cues and clues including symbols or images.
- Lighting at entrances should be high powered and include natural light when possible. Avoid pools of bright light and deep shadows.
- Flooring should be plain, not shiny, and not slippery. Pathways should be wide and free of clutter.
- Provide a quiet seating area where people can go if they are finding it difficult to cope with noise and other distractions.
- A family/unisex restroom will allow someone to be assisted without causing embarrassment to them or another user.

Supporting Employee Care Partners

- Take a holistic approach to employee well-being.
- Create an organization-wide understanding of the challenges care partners face.
- Help employees connect to available community resources and benefits available.
- Establish policies and practices supportive to care partners.
- Measure how well your support is working by surveying employees.

References

Know the 10 Warning Signs

www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_know_the_10_signs.asp

Paths for All: Dementia Friendly Environments

<https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/dementia-friendly-environments>

Dementia Friendly America

<https://www.dfamerica.org/resources>

Dementia Friendly Iowa

<https://dementiafriendlyiowa.org/>

Finding your way around Scotland's first dementia-friendly park

<https://blog.studiolr.com/finding-your-way-in-scotlands-first-dementia-friendly-park/>

Seattle Parks and Recreation: Dementia Friendly Recreation

<http://www.seattle.gov/parks/find/dementia-friendly-recreation>

Dementia Adventure

<https://dementiaadventure.co.uk/>

Parks and recreation are just one important part of the community. Working alongside other sectors can help the whole community become more dementia friendly. Learn more at dfamerica.org.



Adapted from ACT on Alzheimer's® developed tools and resources.