

# Dementia-Friendly Customer Service

Clearer communication. Less stress. Better access.



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# **Why this matters**

- Many members live with dementia or cognitive change
- Staff may see this during calls, appointments, and paperwork
- Small communication changes can improve understanding
- Our role is to reduce barriers and preserve dignity

# What dementia is

## Dementia Is an Umbrella Term

It is used to describe a range of neurological conditions affecting the brain that worsen over time.

### Alzheimer's disease

A brain disorder that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills and, eventually, the ability to carry out the simplest tasks.

### Frontotemporal dementia

A brain disorder that is the result of damage to neurons in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain, causing changes in thinking and behaviors controlled by those parts of the brain.

### Lewy body dementia

A brain disorder that can lead to problems with thinking, movement, behavior, mood, and other body functions.

### Vascular dementia

A brain disorder that is caused by conditions such as stroke that disrupt blood flow to the brain and lead to problems with memory, thinking, and behavior.

To learn more, visit: [www.alzheimers.gov/dementia](http://www.alzheimers.gov/dementia).



Dementia is a group of symptoms caused by different conditions

Symptoms vary from person to person

It can affect memory, language, judgment, and organization

A person may seem fine socially but still struggle with tasks

# What skills it affects

1. Judgment\*
2. Attention\*
3. Perception\*
4. Reasoning\*
5. Organization\*
6. Memory\*
7. Communication\*
8. Abstract Thinking\*
9. Orientation to Time and Place
10. Awareness of Socially Appropriate Norms
11. Ability to Filter Emotional Responses

# How it may show up at work

A customer may:

- ask the same question repeatedly
- lose track of the conversation
- miss part of what you said (1 in 4 words can be missed in a conversation)
- seem upset, suspicious, or overwhelmed
- agree politely without fully understanding
- struggle with forms or next steps
- have difficulty understanding notices
- have trouble keeping track of dates
- Have difficulty with word finding
- Have a harder time making decisions
- Have trouble staying organized

# Behavior is communication

- What may look like:
- anger
- blaming staff
- refusal
- repeated calls
- withdrawal

What that may reflect:  
fear  
confusion  
overload  
fatigue  
pain or discomfort  
an unmet need

# Communication basics

- Slow down
- Use short, clear sentences
- Ask one question at a time
- Give one step at a time
- Pause and allow extra time
- Repeat or rephrase as needed

# Reduce overload

- Lower background noise when possible
- Limit side conversations
- Reduce distractions
- Keep directions simple
- Write down key information

# Nonverbal communication matters

Tone matters

Facial expression matters

Body language matters

Personal space matters

Your calm helps the customer stay calm

# Helpful wording

Instead of: "Do you understand?"

Say: "Let's go over the next step together."

Instead of: "What do you want to do?"

Say: "Would you like to start with the form or the interview?"

Instead of: "You need to do all of this."

Say: "There are two steps today."

# Start with validation

- Acknowledge the feeling first
- Do not argue in the moment
- Reassure the person you will help
- Focus on the next step

# Sample validation phrases

- “I can see this is frustrating.”
- “I’m sorry this has been difficult.”
- “Let’s look at this together.”
- “I’ll go one step at a time with you.”
- “I’m going to help you figure this out.”

# Helpful Phrases to Acknowledge Distress



# Redirect when needed

- Answer the concern briefly
- Shift to the next helpful step
- Offer a simple choice
- Return to the task calmly

# Repetitive questions

- stay calm
- answer briefly
- repeat consistently
- write it down if possible
- point to the next step

# Scenario: upset about benefits

- Customer: “You messed up my case again.”
- Staff response:
  - “I’m sorry this has been frustrating.”
  - “Let’s look at the notice together.”
  - “Tell me which part concerns you most.”

# Scenario: repeated paperwork question

- Customer: “Did I turn in my form? Did I turn it in?”
- Staff response:
  - “Let me check that with you.”
  - “I see we received your ID.”
  - “We are still waiting on proof of income.”
  - “I’ll write that down for you.”

# Scenario: confusion about next steps

- Customer: "I don't know what you want me to do."
- Staff response:
  - "That's okay. Let's break it into two steps."
  - "First, sign this form."
  - "Second, return proof of income by July 10."

# Things to avoid

- arguing
- correcting repeatedly
- talking too fast
- giving too much information at once
- asking too many open-ended questions
- taking behavior personally

# Staff role boundaries

- EAWS Staff are not expected to:
  - diagnose dementia
  - provide clinical counseling
  - force understanding in the moment
- EAWS staff can:
  - adjust communication
  - reduce barriers
  - document concerns factually
  - involve support when needed
  - connect customers with resources

# Referrals to DCS

- Encourage the member to follow-up with their physician, if concerns
- Call with someone into the general ADRC intake line and ask to be connected with the county's local DCS
- Have the member complete an ROI while with you, and fax it to the corresponding agency to place a referral, where DCS can contact them directly
  - Dane County – 608-240-7400 – Ellen Taylor and Kayla Olson
  - Dodge County – (920) 386-3580 – Rob Griesel
  - Juneau County – (608)-847-9371 – Abby Heckman
  - Adams County – 608-339-4251- Emily Wilbur
  - Colombia County – (608) 742-9233 - Nellie Mueller
  - Sauk County – (608)355-3289 – Kurt Goeckermann
  - Sheboygan County - (920) 467-4100 – Lisa Hurley

# Once connected with a DCS

- Memory screening (ANT + Mini Cog and/or MoCA)
  - Free, confidential
  - Offer to fax results to their PCP (with signed ROI)
  - Help connect them with their nearest [memory clinic](#) and/or other community resources
- Consultation with member (and if they like, their support system)
  - Follow-up discussions about the importance of early detection and treatable reasons for cognitive changes
  - Education on brain healthy lifestyle interventions
  - Support groups and other engagement opportunities

# Key takeaways

- Dementia affects more than memory
- Slow down and simplify
- Behavior may reflect confusion, overwhelm or fear
- Validate first
- Focus on one next step
- Dignity matters

# Resources

- [Aging & Disability Resource Centers](#)
  - Dementia Care Specialists
- [Alzheimer's Association<sup>®</sup>](#)
- [National Institute on Aging](#)
- [Wisconsin Alzheimer's Institute](#)
  - [Resources](#)
  - [Caregiver Resources](#)
- [Wisconsin Alzheimer's Disease Research Center](#)
  - [Dementia Matters](#) podcast