

## **Dementia Friendly Tips for All Customer-Facing Staff**

**What all staff should know to better support people living with dementia in businesses of all types and sizes.**

Becoming more dementia friendly means recognizing that a person with dementia can experience the world differently and making efforts to ensure they are supported to live well and participate to the fullest extent possible. Becoming more dementia friendly is an ongoing commitment, and groups of all types and sizes – including businesses – can have an impact.

These simple, practical tips are relevant to businesses of all kinds and may be shared with staff at all levels to help support them in their interactions with customers, clients, patrons or visitors experiencing changes in abilities, behavior or communication due to dementia. Incorporating these tips into everyday interactions can be part of a business' efforts to contribute to a more supportive, inclusive and dementia friendly community.

There are many ways to put this tip sheet to use, such as:

- share copies with all customer-facing staff during onboarding/orientation processes;
- discuss it at your next staff in-service or professional development event;
- add it to your Employee Handbook; and
- display it where it can be visible to staff at all service counters.

For more about the Alzheimer Society of Saskatchewan's **Dementia Friendly Communities** initiative, including how to get involved, visit [www.DementiaFriendlySaskatchewan.ca](http://www.DementiaFriendlySaskatchewan.ca) and contact Abby Wolfe, Public Awareness Coordinator, today:

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### **The ABC's of Dementia:**

Dementia affects more than just memory and is not a normal part of aging. In fact, it can affect individuals in their 60's, 50's, even 40's. There are many different types of dementia and the changes a person may experience can differ depending on the type of dementia they are experiencing, the area of the brain affected, and the person's own characteristics.

There are 10 evidence-based warning signs of dementia that can be summarized as changes in abilities, behaviour, and communication – the ABC's of Dementia. It is not possible to identify that an individual has dementia simply by looking at them, but by being aware of the ABC's of Dementia and utilizing these tips when such changes are observed, staff members can improve their ability to respond to individuals in a way that is supportive, understanding, and person-centred.

### **Approaching or Addressing Someone:**

- If someone seems confused, lost or disoriented, approach them in a friendly manner, introduce yourself and offer to help.
- Do not call to someone or shout from a distance as this may be startling, particularly if the individual cannot identify who is calling to them.
- Maintain eye contact and face the person when speaking to them. Do not take it personally if they do not recognize you, even if you have met before.

### **Finding Items and Navigating:**

- If someone seems to have difficulty navigating the store to locate an item, offering to help by accompanying them to find items may be a welcomed gesture. This may also be more effective than simply pointing in the general vicinity of the item or providing verbal directions.
- Signage and landmarks affect an individual's experience finding items - seasonal displays that obscure regular navigational aids or landmarks can make the space seem unfamiliar and be disorienting to someone with dementia, even if they've been in the space before.

### **Listening:**

- Some people with dementia may experience difficulties with language and verbal communication that may become greater when the person is stressed, rushed or pressured. Listen carefully and assure them that you are focused on them while they are speaking. Provide verbal reassurance to encourage them to feel comfortable and not rushed.
- Try to communicate in a noise-free place where distractions are minimized. A quiet, comfortable seating space with lower foot-traffic may serve the purpose. If such a space is not available, reduce background noise by turning music down (or off) and facing the person directly.

### **Speaking:**

- People living with dementia may find it hard to understand what you are saying or may not be able to answer you. Allow them ample time to reply. Speak clearly, and at a slower pace.
- Keep questions short with one question presented at a time. Yes/No questions may be easier to answer than open-ended questions.
- If the person experiences difficulty in finding the right word, offer suggestions by inferring from context ("Do you mean...?") but do not make assumptions or talk over them.

### **Body Language:**

- Supplement your verbal communication with cues and body language, such as holding the object you are referring to, mimicking the actions for instructions you are giving, or pointing to the specific line on a document you are discussing.
- Even when speech is difficult to interpret be aware of their body language and draw on this information to respond. If this does not prove helpful, ask if they can write it down.

### **Connecting, Not Correcting:**

- People with dementia may say something that does not make sense or may be factually incorrect. Try to avoid arguing with them about reality, as "reality checks" can cause frustration, confusion, and are not an effective communication strategy. Instead, seek to understand and respond to the feeling the person is trying to communicate.

## Tips for Staff on the Phone:

Staff that are interacting with callers over the phone may incorporate further considerations to enhance communication in addition to the above suggestions.

- Enunciation is imperative but avoid making assumptions about hearing loss like speaking at a louder volume or too forcefully. Use shorter, simple sentences and speak at a slower pace.
- Avoid slang, jargon, and other turns of phrase that may be misinterpreted if taken literally. Simple language can be easier to understand, especially when body language and visual cues are not available to supplement communication.
- Frame questions with “yes” or “no” answers, and ask direct, rather than open-ended questions. For example: “How can I help you today?” may be a common greeting, but if the caller is having challenges with word-finding, reframing the question to be more direct, such as “Are you calling about your account today?” may help prompt the caller to respond.
- Reiterate information frequently during the call. For example, recap or review previous discussion and re-introduce yourself if you return to the call after being on hold.
- If processes allow, follow-up by sending a written account of the discussion (such as an email, a text, or a letter). This can help to provide a reference of what was discussed, the outcome, and may assist the person by providing a written reminder of details. It can also be referred back to if the person calls again or if inquiries are repeated.

## Tips for Cashiers, Clerks, and Staff at Service Desks:

- Memory loss may make it difficult for someone with dementia to remember numbers such as a PIN, password, dates, or previous transactions. In this case, being quizzed for details or feeling rushed can increase frustration and anxiety.
- Always wear a nametag which is easily visible and can help to identify you as a staff member, or as someone that may provide assistance for completing transactions.
- If someone with dementia takes an item without paying, remain calm, treat them with dignity. They may have simply forgotten to check out and not intended to take the material. Provide a gentle reminder by offering to assist them to complete the transaction, for example, ask “May I help you to complete your transaction today?” in a friendly manner.
- If someone experiences difficulties in handling money or using a card, ask if you can help count out coins or try suggesting alternate strategies which may provide another option to complete the transaction. Be patient and allow the person to take their time.
- To provide assistance with filling out a form, offer to read questions aloud and repeat as needed. Indicate where signatures or answers are required by pointing clearly or highlighting the area. Simplify terminology and allow ample time for a response.