

Digital for People Living with Dementia

What is dementia (and what isn't it?)

The ageing process can bring about some normal age-related memory changes such as occasionally losing your car keys or forgetting the name of an acquaintance. These memory lapses might be more common with age, but they probably aren't a sign of dementia.

The word 'dementia' describes a set of symptoms that over time can affect memory, problem-solving, language and behaviour. There are lots of different types of dementia, but Alzheimer's disease is the most common type and mostly affects people aged 65+.

Symptoms include:

- Forgetting recent events
- Feeling confused
- Getting lost in familiar places
- Problems doing tasks that involve several steps, like getting dressed

How to support people with dementia

May Connolly from Heeley Development Trust really emphasised that the best way to support someone living with dementia to use digital is the way you'd support any other learner, with patience, kindness and understanding.

It can help to know what kind of behaviour you might expect. People living with dementia might: ask the same question repeatedly, become restless or agitated, shout out or scream. These behaviours might be because they are thirsty, hungry or in pain, they may have misunderstood something or they may be frustrated or bored.

When you're supporting someone with dementia to use digital, it can help to:

- **Be positive**
Dementia can make learning new things difficult and scary. If you have high, but realistic, expectations of what a person can do, this can boost their self-esteem and attitude towards digital.
- **Use visual reminders**
For example, use printed resources with images to represent each step in finding podcasts on their device.
- **Limit distractions and noise**
Find a quiet spot and provide one-to-one support if possible.
- **Ask simple, closed questions, one at a time**
"Do you want to find a programme on BBC iPlayer?"
- **When the going gets tough, distract and redirect**
If the person is getting frustrated or distressed with an activity, move on to something else. "That's enough Google maps, let's find some music to dance to!"

Using digital to support people with dementia

- Using digital photos on their device to talk about their past, their family, or hobbies and interests
- Saving digital bios onto their device can help them to remember new people, e.g. support workers or digital champions
- Online calendars (for example Google Calendar) can be a great way to set reminders, e.g. that a relative is coming to visit, a friend's birthday, to take their medicine or to get ready for a doctor's appointment.
- Digital can also be used in lots of ways to soothe people living with dementia when they are restless or agitated, for example:
 - Creating nostalgic music playlists (see the guide to playlists for more details)
 - Using mindfulness apps like, X, Y or Z
 - Creative activities, like this pottery app.
- Assistive technology can help people living with dementia to maintain their independence, e.g. Smart speakers that remind you what day it is, stoves that turn off when not being used, fall alarms, etc. [Social Care Institute for Excellence](#) has a useful list of reports on this topic.

Final Thoughts

As May says, supporting people living with dementia to use digital isn't that different from supporting anyone else, but it can help to know what to expect and how to approach the session. You can find some more suggestions in [this report](#) from our work with the NHS.

About Heeley Development Trust

As well as supporting digital inclusion, the team at Heeley Development Trust offer a range of services for their local community, from a bike repair shop, community festivals, support for jobseekers, dementia cafes and outreach support. These services help keep older people connected. Their community team manager, May Connolly, drew from her experience in mental health support and digital inclusion to give these tips for organisations who support people with dementia to get online.

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<http://heeleytrust.org/>