

Hard Dementia Conversations Cheatsheet



Purpose of This Cheatsheet

This cheatsheet helps you know, at a glance, what to say during the four most difficult conversations you may have with your person with dementia.

1. Asking about a family member who passed away

Figure out what your person believes is true about the person who passed before responding.

To gather information, ask questions like:

- “When did you last see X?”
- “Where do you think X is?”
- “It’s X time. What does X usually do at this time?”

If they believe there is nothing wrong with the person who passed, either have them answer their own question about where that person is, or give an explanation that fits what they already believe.

If they know their family member was sick or that something is wrong, and they are demanding answers, validate them by confirming that something is wrong and that the person passed from the illness.

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2. Moving to a higher level of care

If your person with dementia believes that nothing is wrong with them and that they can take care of themselves, don't waste your time trying to convince them otherwise.

It is still important that they know they need to move. The reason they are moving has to align with what they already believe.

Examples:

- Tell them they need to move because of termites, mold, etc.
- Tell them their landlord is selling (if they are renting).
- Tell them they are going to a rehabilitation facility to get better from an illness they do believe they have.

If they know something is wrong with them, but still don't think moving to a higher level of care is necessary, try:

- "The doctor wants you to stay in [long-term care] for a bit, until he thinks you're improving."
- "Your health has taken a turn, and hopefully this will be temporary."

The key is to frame the move as something you're trying, or as temporary, to help them feel more in control. The truth is that no situation is guaranteed to be forever, even if you don't think you could move them out.

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3. Getting them to do ADLs they believe they already did

Don't try to convince them that they haven't done their activities of daily living. Instead, get them to do their hygiene tasks in different ways.

Examples:

- Ask them to sample alternative hygiene products with you to get them to do the hygiene task.
- Ask them to "try on" a new outfit if they are refusing to change clothes.
- Right after a walk or a mess is the best time to tell them they need to shower, so you avoid "I don't need to."

4. Getting them to accept help in staying safe

Don't try to convince them that they can't keep themselves safe if they don't believe it. This applies when they can no longer:

- Walk safely
- Drive safely
- Manage their own finances

Instead, figure out what they already believe about their abilities in areas like driving or finances, and give them reasons why you, or someone else, would need to help them.