



## **Dementia Friendly Community Cafes and Friendship Groups**

Thank you for providing a regular opportunity in your parish where people can meet for a drink, a chat, and much else besides. This activity represents community life in all its richness and gives those who attend a sense of belonging and friendship from which people with dementia may benefit. Having a diagnosis of dementia can mean friends melt away and you no longer feel part of the local community. Loneliness is a real risk and your confidence takes a knock, but the benefits of socialising and having fun remain as important as ever. Here are some tips for adapting the welcome you already provide so it embraces local people with memory problems.

### **Offer a warm welcome**

A guest with dementia may not remember exactly what they did while they were with you, but if they sense warmth in your welcome they will remember this and want to come again. It is especially important to be aware of the messages you are giving 'non-verbally'. A generous smile, kind eyes and a relaxed posture convey friendship eloquently when understanding of language may be failing. Being greeted at the door and made to feel at home is essential.

### **Provide a comfortable environment that makes sense**

As people with cognitive problems can find it difficult to interpret their surroundings, it is helpful if you use clear signs at eye level to indicate where things are, and that the décor and layout of the room shows its purpose. Attractively laid tables and visible refreshments tell the visitor that this is a café-style activity.

### **Make introductions to help the flow of conversation**

One of the key challenges for people with dementia in social situations is that it becomes harder to start up a conversation and then follow the thread, especially in a group. As a supportive volunteer, you can ease the person into conversations, introducing them to other people and checking that they are not floundering.

### **Don't rush conversations and give full attention**

A person with dementia can feel ignored if conversations are fleeting and the listener is distracted. Being willing to listen and showing in your body language that you want nothing more than to be with the person expresses true acceptance and friendship. Pace your conversations carefully, giving time for the person to absorb what you are saying and respond with their own thoughts. Keep your sentences relatively short, using language that is easy to grasp, and make sure you have the person's attention through eye contact and being at the same level.

### **Avoid experiences that over-tax the brain**

Exercising mental skills requires more effort in dementia, so think of conversation starters and activities that don't put too much pressure on the person to remember information. Being plied with lots of questions or put on the spot with a puzzle might leave the person feeling uncomfortable. Try to take your cue from the person with dementia, noticing the level at which they appear relaxed and comfortable.

### **Try not to draw attention to unusual responses and treat the person normally**

Sometimes in dementia there can be a dwindling awareness of socially acceptable ways to talk and behave. Try not to be put off by odd behaviour. If you are comfortable, the person with dementia and their carer will feel comfortable too, in a world where they are longing to be treated like everyone else.

### **Don't make assumptions**

Every person with dementia is different. They will have things with which they struggle but will also have skills and abilities they want to use. They may be in the early stages of dementia where symptoms are mild, or they may have been living with the condition for several years.

### **Show kindness and empathy towards carers**

If the person with dementia is accompanied by a carer, paid or unpaid, find ways to show appreciation of their role which can be demanding at times and requires stamina and patience. Being asked how they are feeling can be a welcome change for carers when the focus seems always on the person for whom they are caring.

### **Tap into skills and memories to build confidence**

If you get to know the person over several sessions, finding out about their interests and past experiences in work and family, you can open up conversations the person will enjoy. Talking about current affairs might be shaky ground if short term memory is a problem, but reminiscing about past events can demonstrate a depth of knowledge and insight in an older person from which you will benefit.

### **Value fun, humour and creativity**

People with dementia often use humour to help them cope with life's struggles and sharing a joke is a great way of breaking down barriers. There can also be a willingness to experiment with new avenues of creativity, with music, dance and art giving a valuable outlet for self expression.

### **Recognise and respond to feelings that are expressed**

Even if the words are muddled at times, you can usually pick up the feelings a person is expressing. Try to interpret and reflect back to the person what you can pick up about the emotional content of what they are communicating.