

INFORMATION FOR AGED CARE WORKERS

Trauma and dementia: What do I need to do?



Phoenix
AUSTRALIA

A person with dementia who has experienced trauma may find it hard to express their feelings or explain how trauma is affecting them. Instead, they may show distress in other ways, like:

- being agitated, irritable or aggressive
- withdrawing from people
- refusing care
- not engaging in activities

There are many things you can do to help manage their distress.

"I know that when I take the time to have a chat with Rhonda, she's much more relaxed and more comfortable with me touching her. It may only add a few minutes to my job but it's worth it."

Help them feel safe

- **Create a connection with the person** by talking about things important to them, such as good times in their life. People with dementia can be sensitive to your body language, so try to act in a gentle and relaxed way. Smile and make eye contact.
- **Work slowly and calmly**, and try not to rush the person.
- **Explain the tasks that you are going to do** so that the person understands what is going to happen. Ask for permission. Allow the person time to think and respond.
- **Keep a routine across the day** so they know what to expect.
- **Try not to make many demands of the person.**

Reduce triggers for distress

- **Try to identify what causes their distress** – what was the person doing or what was happening around them when they became distressed? Something may have reminded them of a past trauma.
- **Change their environment** – reduce bright lights or encourage the person to move away from loud or sudden noises so that they are not overstimulated.
- **Find out if the person is in pain** – people can't always tell you they are in pain. Pain can be a reminder of past trauma and cause distress.

Help the person calm down

- Listen to their concerns and reassure them.
- Find out what helps them calm down, for example, holding hands or going for a walk.
- Distract the person with an object or activity of interest to them.
- Guide them towards a quiet area.
- Ask them to take some long, slow, calming breaths.

It's helpful to work together and share the strategies you find helpful with other staff and family who are also caring for the person with dementia.

Remember to look after yourself

Caring for someone with trauma can affect you over time. If you have a difficult day or are upset by an experience with a person you are caring for, talk to a colleague or supervisor you trust.

Getting help for older people affected by trauma

It's never too late for a person to get help. Talking to a counsellor or mental health specialist can help, even with more severe forms of dementia. Talk to your manager, a GP or geriatrician if you notice that the person you are caring for is distressed often, or for more than a few weeks.

Useful resources and services

Dementia Support Australia
www.dementia.com.au

National Dementia Helpline
1800 100 500