

Mind Matters Podcast:

How Do I Visit? - Ways to Engage Friends and Neighbors Living with Cognitive Change

Welcome to another episode of the Mind Matters podcast where we talk about brain health, dementia, and many topics in between. Today's topic is one that we get asked about frequently, and that's how do I visit with someone who might be living with cognitive change. Visiting a friend, neighbor, or loved one who is living with some level of cognitive change can feel unfamiliar at first, but it remains one of the most important things you can do for that person. In this episode of the Mind Matters podcast, we explore how to have a meaningful visit, why continuing to show up matters, and how to bring these skills into your everyday interactions throughout the community.

To start, it is important to acknowledge that visits are going to feel different. The relationship may have shifted, and that is perfectly normal. The key is that you want the relationship to continue — and doing so simply requires a little more flexibility, adaptability, and patience than it may have before. Rather than dwelling on how visits used to look or holding onto old expectations, the focus should shift entirely toward connection. That becomes the new goal, and everything else flows from there.

As that relationship shifts, so too should our awareness of the emotions that come along with it. You may feel nervous, excited, or sad — before, during, or after a visit. Fear is also common, particularly around the uncertainty of how a visit might unfold. All of these feelings are normal, and none of them should prevent you from visiting. After a visit, it can be helpful to process those emotions with someone you trust, whether that is a friend, family member, support group, or counselor.

Another aspect of visiting is communication; not just what do we say or how do we say it, but how do we make sure we are doing it in a way that allows for that meaningful connection to take place. Meaningful communication during a visit is less about saying the right thing and more about how the interaction makes the other person feel. Since communication is roughly 93% nonverbal, the way you approach someone — your body language, tone of voice, and overall demeanor — sets the stage before a single word is spoken. Being warm and open in your physical presence signals that you are safe and approachable.

As dementia progresses, verbal communication often becomes more difficult. A person may struggle with word-finding, repeat themselves, or substitute incorrect words. Rather than correcting or arguing, the goal is to use positive, supportive language and to gently help them along. Avoid saying “no, that’s wrong” or “you already told me that.” Instead, redirect naturally by picking up on what they seem to mean and guiding the conversation toward something that feels good. Redirecting a conversation can feel unfamiliar at first, but a helpful approach is to bring up a topic or interest from the person's past, or simply suggest a change of scenery, like a short walk, to naturally shift their attention.

If their sense of reality differs from yours — a different season, a younger age, or a memory that feels present to them — meet them there rather than trying to bring them back to your reality. Entering their world is not a compromise; it is a gift.

Creating the right environment also makes a meaningful difference in being able to communicate effectively. When possible, reduce background noise by turning off the television or lowering music, and find a quieter space where conversation can flow more easily. You can take a light approach —

“the music is a little loud for me, do you mind if I turn it down?” — which accomplishes the goal without drawing attention to the reason behind it.

Beyond the visit itself, there are many practical ways to make each interaction more enjoyable and less anxiety-provoking. First and foremost - be prepared to adapt. Hobbies and interests that a person once loved may no longer be possible in their original form, but the spirit of them often remains. Someone who can no longer do needlepoint might still enjoy looking at needlework they created years ago or browsing examples online. Following their lead, embracing where they are, and being willing to pivot without frustration is what makes a visit truly meaningful rather than just well-intentioned.

Going in with a loose plan can help — a short walk, a trip to get ice cream, time outside listening to birds, a family photo album, or even bringing a beloved pet. These small anchors give the visit shape and reduce the uncertainty of “I don’t know what we’ll do.” Timing matters, too: mornings are generally better cognitively, and visits of 15 to 30 minutes tend to be more comfortable than longer ones. Consistency in scheduling, whenever possible, also provides a sense of familiarity and routine.

It is also worth being comfortable with silence. Not every moment needs to be filled with conversation. Sometimes the most powerful thing you can offer is simply your presence — sitting together, smiling, listening to soft music. This is especially true in the later stages of dementia, when verbal communication may no longer be possible. Auditory and emotional connections remain intact even then, and a gentle touch, familiar music, or a meaningful scent can still create a moment of genuine connection. Do not let the absence of words become a reason to stop showing up.

One final hurdle when visiting someone with cognitive change can be how to appropriately end the visit. Ending a visit can feel difficult, particularly if the person is upset by your leaving. Do not hesitate to lean on team members or other caregivers for support in making a smooth exit. Asking a team member to check in on your loved one, bring them a snack, or engage them in an activity as you leave can ease the transition for everyone. Our team members are well-versed in supporting people through just these kinds of moments.

We hope you have enjoyed this episode of Mind Matters, and that you remember, above all, to just keep visiting. Even when the interaction is not what you hoped for, even when it is awkward or emotionally complicated, your presence matters. The tips we have discussed here become more natural over time — they are tools that you add to your toolbox, and the more you use them, the more second nature they become. Learning about dementia, responding rather than reacting, and continuing to show up for the people you care about is one of the most meaningful things you can do. Until next time, remember: Your Mind Matters.