



Catholic Diocese of Leeds

What is dementia?

“Medical science is a long way from giving us any cures. The only solutions within our grasp are found at a simple, honest, human level; through kindness and through love.”

Professor Tom Kitwood



There are currently 850,000 people living with Dementia in the UK, and this number is set to rise in the next 30 years. This affects 1 in 14 people over the age of 65 and is likely to affect a significant percentage of our parishioners.

One of the most distressing conditions affecting people in the UK is loneliness. For older people, and especially those with dementia and their carers, this problem is often greatly exacerbated. This is a real missionary challenge for the Church in our age. For we go in the name of Jesus who brings ‘Good News’ to the poor; the defender of the powerless, who identifies with the vulnerable and who brings hope.

We need to offer hope to the people we meet. It is possible to live well with dementia with the right support and our parishes have a vital role to play. We can be a living testimony that God cares and that people living with dementia are indeed ‘held by God’.

Dementia is caused by diseases of the brain. It can be due to a number of causes and affects everyone differently. Alzheimer’s is the most common cause of Dementia in people over the age of 65 but there are many other types of dementia that affect people in different ways. You may have heard of Vascular Dementia; Frontal Lobe; Lewy Body or Parkinson’s Dementia but there are many types.

Memory loss can be one of the early signs of Dementia but it is not the only sign. People can develop difficulties with thinking, problem solving or language. The symptoms may be small initially but become more severe over time. They are a problem when they affect a person’s daily life.

You may have observed people in your church community who have difficulty concentrating, making decisions and carrying out a sequence of tasks, such as making a drink, or finding the right page in the hymn book or liturgy. You may know people who have difficulty with language such as finding the right word for something.

Some people may have trouble judging distances, or managing steps or stairs. They may misinterpret what they see and become fearful of specific things because they perceive them differently.

These may be symptoms of Dementia but other conditions such as depression and infections can also cause similar symptoms. It is important that a person seeks medical and professional advice for a proper diagnosis.

It is understandable that a person with some of these symptoms might be afraid to seek help. Their GP can help by establishing the cause of their difficulties. The progress of dementia can be slowed down in different ways and so early diagnosis is helpful. Also these symptoms may sometimes be due to other treatable conditions.

The symptom’s of Dementia are progressive, but affect everyone differently. It is possible for people with Dementia to live independently, and to live well, with the right support.

“When we ask the question **what does it feel like to have dementia** rather than simply **what is dementia** we begin to see this condition in a very different light.”

Professor John Swinton



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What can your parish do?

“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in the strange land of dementia?”

Malcolm Goldsmith



We all need to contribute to being welcoming, inclusive and nurturing communities for all, including people with dementia and those who share their journey.

We need to find ways to minister to people with dementia so that they know with everything in their being that they are ‘held by God’ as they are helped to experience once again life in all its fullness that Jesus promised to everyone.

The main thrust of our efforts should be aimed at allowing people to be themselves for as long as possible. We must constantly remind ourselves that people with dementia have a lot to teach those of us who don’t and they can continue to contribute enormously to the lives of their friends, family and their parishes.

When the Israelites were led away into exile in Babylon they entered a strange land. It seemed like a disaster but new patterns of worship developed and their faith survived. Malcolm Goldsmith suggests an experience of dementia may be similar as we are being led unwillingly into a strange land, but it is possible to sing the Lord’s song within it. We all have a role to help enable that to be the case.

The temptation to avoid is to make ‘choices’ on people’s behalf, even if they are well-intentioned. The danger is to almost ‘imprison’ a person by confining them to a ‘safe’ environment.

- **Keep in touch.** Try to find out why the person is not longer at Mass or at parish events. Someone needs to visit them, preferably someone who has known them.
- **Listen with empathy.** Stay present to what is real at that moment for the person. Listen to their story with compassion and respect, not trying to put them right. We must enter their reality and by truly listening, we might learn something.
- **Affirm the person.** Things we have experienced can be brought back through reminiscence and the senses: sight, sound, taste, smell, touch. The person you are with has a life full of experiences and you need to find out the things that interested them so you can help them remember.
- **Help the person put together a spiritual memory box** that brings together things that remind them of their faith.

- **Book a Dementia Friends session for your parish.** This 45 minute session helps people learn a bit about what it’s like to live with dementia. Contact Rachel at growing.old.gracefully@dioceseofleeds.org.uk for more information.
- **Organise a monthly Quiet Mass.** St John Mary Vianney in Leeds hold a monthly weekday Mass for people living with memory loss and their carers.
- **A Memory Cafe.** Some parishes are using their parish centre to offer a place where people can meet together over tea and coffee fortnightly. The carers might have an opportunity to move to another room where they can talk and share their problems. Meanwhile, those with dementia enjoy a morning of reminiscing and sharing stories. Volunteers plan these sessions and the subjects cover a wide range.
- **Include Care Homes in parish life.** The website www.carehome.co.uk has details of all the local homes in your parish.

“I am struck by how sharing our weakness and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing our qualities and successes.” Jean Vanier