

# Furnishings and décor

## THE ENVIRONMENT AND DEMENTIA

This Help Sheet suggests some ways to make furnishings and décor as safe and comfortable as possible for a person with dementia, their family and carers. Not all suggestions will suit all people or situations, but some people may find a solution to a particular problem they are experiencing with furnishings and décor.

The aim of any changes to the furnishings and décor of the home of a person with dementia is to help the person find their way around and maintain a familiar environment. It should also help to:

- Trigger memories
- Support independent mobility and getting in and out of chairs
- Ensure that lifting and transfers are easier and safer for family and carers

### What to try

#### Furniture

Some people with dementia use furniture for support as they walk to prevent falls. It may be necessary to remove swinging chairs, chairs on wheels and rocking chairs, as well as obstacles like coffee tables and foot stools, from walking paths.

It will probably be necessary to have or acquire a sturdy comfortable arm chair that is easy to get in and out of. There are number of considerations when choosing a chair:

- The chair should be stable
- If it has wheels they must be able to lock
- If it has controls for reclining, they may need to be located at the back, out of reach
- Ideally, arm rests should be strong, extend further out than the seat and be smooth with no sharp edges
- The chair should be higher than usual. Special blocks to raise the height of a chair are available

- It may be necessary to have incontinence-proof (easy wash, with water proof backing) fabric or a waterproof pad on the seat. Incontinence-proof fabrics are available now in home-like colours and patterns
- Ideally, the upholstery should be in a contrasting colour to the floor and walls to make it easier to see
- Recliner chairs that tilt back can be comforting and safe for people who have a tendency to fall forwards out of a regular flat seat. Chairs that have an automatic lift facility to help people get up, can be frightening for some people with dementia

People with dementia often have difficulty judging the distance from furniture and bench tops and so suffer lots of bumps and bruises. Remove furniture with sharp edges or find some way of padding or covering the edges by sanding or attaching sponge rubber or corner buffers. If necessary, remove precious and breakable ornaments.

#### Cupboards and drawers

If the person with dementia constantly rummages in drawers and cupboards and relocates items, it may be necessary to lock some cupboards to prevent access to breakable or dangerous items, or prevent tampering with important papers. Wherever possible, choose discreet locks.

On the other hand, provide ready access to other cupboards, boxes and containers with safe items and interesting collections of things

which trigger memories for the person or provide activity, textures and colours for stimulation.

Many people with dementia lose access to their possessions because they can no longer remember how to use cupboards. Some of the things that are stored in desks and cupboards could be put out occasionally to see if the person has any interest in looking and sorting through them.

### **Décor**

Remove sharp objects if they are likely to cause harm. This might include tools for an open fire, letter openers, scissors or bottle openers.

Remove any pictures, mobiles or glass hangings if they are disturbing.

Sometimes patterns on wallpaper, curtains and upholstery can be disturbing for people with dementia because they are mistaken for objects or insects.

Try hanging a print with a soothing scene from nature. Some people enjoy wall hangings with different textures to touch.

Retain or display photos, ornaments and other memorabilia that trigger memories. Photos could be labelled with names and relationships. Try showing old photos of the person's childhood.

Photos of the person at recent events and with friends and relatives could be used to reinforce their sense of identity and recent memory.

Try to find out the way the person's house was decorated when they were younger. Some of those styles or items from the past may provide some comfort now.

The person's own paintings, craft, or needlework could be framed or displayed to support the person's sense of self esteem and to provide positive conversation topics for visitors.

When redecorating, it is important to retain the familiar, change as little as possible but

reduce confusing clutter and enhance memories and comfort.

There are different approaches to the use and recognition of colour for people with dementia:

- Pastel colours are seen as grey and strong bright primary colours are recommended
- Bright colours are distracting and uncomfortable and soft or moderate tones are suggested

Whatever colours are used, they can also be used to camouflage exits or rooms which are not safe for the person, by painting doors the same colour as the walls. Painting doors in a colour which contrasts with the walls can make the door stand out and help people find the door. Flat paint should be used to avoid reflected glare.

Some people decorate the front door if they are living in a block of flats where all the doors look the same. Similarly a sign or picture of a toilet on the toilet door can help.

### **Further Information**

Alzheimer's Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**.

For further information and to view other Help Sheets visit our website at **[www.alzheimers.org.au](http://www.alzheimers.org.au)**