

Supporting people living with dementia in care homes to respond to loss and grief

This information sheet has been developed by the Association for Dementia Studies at the University of Worcester (www.worc.ac.uk/dementia) to help support care homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is general advice only and a person-centred approach should always be sought.

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented care homes with very challenging circumstances including unanticipated deaths and multiple losses of residents. Both residents and staff will need time, compassion and support to respond to their grief. This guidance sheet is designed to help staff and families support residents living with dementia, as their cognitive difficulties may affect the ways they express and process grief and uncertainty.

- Do not assume that a person living with dementia is not aware of the changes and losses that have occurred. People often take-in more than we think. For example, they may well notice that the person they usually sit next to is no longer around.
- Remember that grief is a natural process that we all experience when loss happens. This is no different for a person living with dementia, but they may find it difficult to express their feelings in a straight-forward way or understand why this has happened.
- It can be tempting to distract a person when they're experiencing negative emotions like sadness or anxiety. However, feeling negative emotions is normal human experience and providing comfort and reassurance will often be more helpful in the long term.
- Make sure that you gently offer people ways to engage with any memorial you have in the home by explaining simply what is happening and why (e.g. "In this book we have pictures of residents who have died. I look at it when I am missing someone,"). You should then be led by the person's own verbal and non-verbal communication to see whether they wish to explore further. Do not force anyone to engage, but also don't assume that they will not want to.
- If you can, speak to people who know the person well to find out how they would have previously dealt with grief and loss. There may be specific beliefs, rituals, objects or phrases that are familiar to the person that will help them understand and be involved. In particular, any religious faith (and associated rituals) is likely to be especially important during times of grief.
- Be thoughtful about the words you use as some common phrases associated with death can cause extra confusion (e.g. 'passed away', 'gone to heaven'). There is no right or wrong here, but it's about being mindful of the words or phrases the person themselves is familiar with.
- Remember that present events can trigger past memories for people living with dementia, and so as well as noticing that something is different now, they may also be re-experiencing previous losses in their lives. Provide physical and emotional comfort for a person when they're showing signs of upset or anxiety (whether in their words or behaviour), even if you are not sure why.

