

5 ways to get alongside someone with dementia

By Jonny Lawrance-Owen

supplement to [this Discipleship Weekly article](#)

Getting alongside someone with dementia is one of the hardest callings, especially if you are also their carer. It can be exhausting, frustrating and all-consuming. Here are some thoughts which may be helpful as you seek to get alongside someone with dementia:

Slow down and be attentive

“If we are going to accompany someone well, we need to abandon the efficiency mind-set. We need to take our time and simply delight in another person’s way of being.”¹

Being able to notice the subtle ways someone with dementia might communicate requires us to slow ourselves down and pay close attention. If we are in a rush, we might miss them.

Where can we see little signs of God at work in the person? What small, special moments have they given us today? We need to have realistic expectations of how the person can respond to us. They may not now be able to hold a conversation, but they may be able to smile or hold our hand.

¹ David Brooks, The Essential Skills for Being Human, The New York Times, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/19/opinion/social-skills-connection.html>

“When our expectations match our companion’s capabilities, there is less stress for both parties.”²

Give the person (and God) the benefit of the doubt

When I read the Bible to Uncle David, he often seems to become more still and focused. It’s easy for me to adopt a cynical mindset towards ‘spiritual moments’ like these as explainable in purely medical terms. But we really don’t know what the person is experiencing inwardly. God has been speaking to and working in the person before they had dementia, why would He stop now?!

Let’s give them, and God, the benefit of the doubt, that He is continuing to speak and work in them now.

Remember with them

People are held in God’s memories, but they are also held in the memories of their community. Being a part of the Body of Christ means, in a very beautiful way, that we allow other members of the body to hold our memories for us. The person may not remember, but we can remember for them.

So, when we visit somebody with dementia, we can re-tell their stories back to them. Look at old photographs together, tell them about past Christmases and parties shared, or funny moments from the past. The aim is not to make them remember, but for us to remember for them.

Looking after ourselves

Getting alongside people with dementia can be extremely tiring, even more so if we are a carer. We need to find

² Judy Cornish, The Dementia Handbook, 2017

rhythms that keep re-charging our physical, emotional and spiritual batteries. For me, it's watching sport, going for a walk or reading the Bible with friends. What helps you to recharge your batteries?

We'll need to ask for help from our community. We're likely to need help sharing visiting or caring responsibilities. And we will certainly need friends to be praying for us, asking how we are doing, and supporting us.

Consider how God is blessing us

God has a vocation and calling in this world for His people, even those with dementia. Allow God to bless you through the person with dementia.

It may be the gift of slowing down, it may be that they speak an encouraging word or phrase, it may be that they push us towards greater reliance on God. Maybe you could pray, 'Lord, how do you want to use this person to bless me today?'

A final prayer

Though I know nothing else, still let me know you.
And if a morning dawns when I can no longer name you or
remember to call on you,
be more immediately present to me than my own
confusion, than my own breath.
Be to me a peace and a light and an abiding sense that I am
loved and held and that all will be well.

O God, in my forgetfulness, remember me, your child.³

Amen.

³ Every Moment Holy, Volume II: Death, Grief, & Hope. Douglas Kaine McKelvey, 2021