



## Demystifying Dementia

Finding out that someone close to you has dementia, and then coping with it from day to day, can be distressing for everyone involved. It can be particularly challenging explaining dementia to children and young people.

Many of our Cubs Scouts have grandparents or family members who suffer from dementia. If we don't prepare our young people for what dementia can mean, a simple visit with a grandparent could turn into a shocking experience.

Children and young people are often aware of difficult atmospheres and tensions even when they haven't been told the facts, so it can be reassuring for them to understand what the problem is.

By not talking to young people about it, you may be unintentionally setting a standard that the topic is not open for discussion.

Seeing how people around them cope with difficult situations helps young people learn valuable skills about dealing with tough and distressing situations, and being able to manage painful emotions.

## Explaining Dementia to Cub Scouts

Our brains are amazing. They work hard to store memories. They help us to make sense of the world. They control everything that we think, feel, say and do. Our brains make us who we are.

Like all parts of the body, brains sometimes become ill. There are illnesses that stop a person's brain from working properly.

When a person has one of these illnesses, their brain starts to have problems doing all the jobs it has to do.

The person may start to have problems with remembering, thinking, speaking or seeing what or where things are. They might say or do things that seem strange to us. They may find it more difficult to do everyday things. They may not seem like the same person they used to be.

We call these problems **dementia**.



## What happens to someone with Dementia?

When a person has dementia, they change over time. Their brain starts to forget some of the things they have learned and has trouble helping them do other things. They might forget words and names. They might forget what they've just said, and say the same thing over and over again. They may get confused and have trouble working out what to do and when. These changes are nobody's fault, and the person can't stop them from happening. They happen because the person's brain is not working like it used to.

As their brain gets more unwell, they start to have trouble with more and more things. They might have trouble working out where they are, and get lost easily. They might not be able to recognize who people are – even people that they love. They might find it really hard to do things that used to be easy for them.

A person with dementia needs help and care from other people. Their family and friends often help.



## How Cub Scouts might feel about dementia

Children may need reminding why the person with dementia sometimes behaves in an unusual way. Young people may need to talk about their feelings as changes occur. These feelings may include:

- grief and sadness at what is happening to someone they love
- anxiety about what will happen to the person in the future
- fear, irritation or embarrassment – for example at unusual behaviour in front of other people
- boredom, for example with repeatedly hearing the person with dementia repeat the same stories and questions
- guilt for feeling some of the emotions listed above
- confusion about ‘role reversal’ – having to be responsible for someone who used to be responsible for them
- a feeling of loss if their relative doesn’t seem to be the same person that they were, or because it isn’t possible to communicate with them in the same way anymore



It should be pointed out that through the early and moderate stages, children and individuals with dementia can interact really well.

Children are very good at being in the moment — and people with dementia often live in a moment.

Together, they can do simple tasks — folding clothes, potting plants, going for a walk. The child and the person with dementia can be completely in the moment together.



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### **Dementia Friendly Communities**

Alzheimer's is a disease that causes about half of all cases of dementia.

The Alzheimer Society has a "Dementia Friendly Community" initiative which focuses on improving the inclusion and quality of life of people with dementia and their families. It's a town or village where people with dementia are understood, respected and supported, and confident they can contribute to community life. The seven communities in the Republic of Ireland are located in Ballina/Killaloe in Co. Clare, Co. Donegal, Galway city, Mallow in Co. Cork, Callan in Co. Kilkenny, Cavan town and Co. Wicklow.

The locals will be aware of and understand dementia, and people with dementia will feel included and involved.

DFC's provide the opportunity to demystify dementia so that it is no longer perceived as something to be feared. DFC's demonstrate a high level of public awareness and understanding about dementia.

### **What can the Cub Pack do to help?**

Young people sometimes believe that they are responsible for the dementia. These feelings are a common reaction to any unhappy situation, especially if they do not understand it or are not given a clear explanation of why their loved one has changed. It is important to address their anxieties and to provide reassurance.

Have a speaker from the local Alzheimer's Society come to one of your meetings to discuss the condition with the Cub Scouts, and perhaps their parents as well. Provide a forum for the Cubs to ask questions, to talk about their feelings, and to share their experiences.

### **Useful Links**

Alzheimer's Society of Ireland [www.alzheimer.ie](http://www.alzheimer.ie)

Alzheimer's Society <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-us/northern-ireland>

Understand together [www.understandtogether.ie](http://www.understandtogether.ie)

