

Responding to People with Dementia

Tips for Law Enforcement



What is Dementia?

The term “dementia” describes a group of symptoms that affect memory, language, thinking, problem solving, personality and behavior. Brain changes caused by dementia interfere with normal activities and gradually get worse over time.

Alzheimer’s is the most common cause of dementia, especially in adults over the age of 65.

Mild forgetfulness can be a normal part of aging - but dementia is not. Some of the early warning signs of dementia include:

- Memory Loss
- Difficulty with daily tasks
- Poor judgement & bad decisions
- Easily confused
- Trouble with reading & writing
- Repeating questions
- Unable to organize thoughts
- Unusual behavior

Used with permission. September 2019 Alzheimer’s San Diego.

Encountering Someone with Dementia

Brain changes caused by dementia can impact a person’s ability to function normally at home or in the community. There are a number of common scenarios where law enforcement may encounter a person living with dementia, including traffic accidents, domestic violence or medical emergencies. It would not be uncommon for a person with dementia to:

- Become disoriented and lost even in their own neighborhood
- Not recognize when their behavior is inappropriate or illegal
- Provide unreliable reports due to memory loss or confusion
- Have difficulty following simple instructions
- Call 911 thinking a misplaced item has been stolen
- Be suspicious or mistake the identity of a family member or other person who assists them
- Have difficulty controlling their emotions
- Be unable to communicate discomfort or pain
- Be mistaken for a person who is experiencing depression, intoxication, a medical delirium or a psychotic episode

A person with dementia is not likely to be aware of their confusion or memory loss. It is important to be aware of your approach:

- Always approach from the front
- Give a simple explanation of why you are there
- Address the person by name
- Show badge or identification
- Maintain a calm and reassuring demeanor
- Maintain eye contact
- Be aware of their need for personal space

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Communication Strategies

People with Alzheimer's and other types of dementia can have difficulty finding the right words, understanding their meaning and lose the ability to follow a conversation. They may have difficulty understanding what is being said and need more time to respond.

- Be patient and positive
- Use short sentences and simple questions
- Focus on one idea at a time
- Slowly repeat instructions if needed
- Focus on feelings rather than words
- Stay in one place while talking
- Don't try to argue, reason, or rationalize
- Avoid testing their memory
- Stay away from open ended questions
- Minimize distractions
- Be aware of your body language and tone of voice

Did you know that only 7% of communication comes from the words we use? Everything a person does, including their behavior, has meaning. Focus on the individual and what they are trying to tell you. If a person with dementia has difficulty understanding what you are saying, try using hand gestures and body language to convey your message. Above all, offer reassurance, compassion and kindness.

Wandering

People with dementia can easily become confused, scared and disoriented, even in familiar places. Wandering is common and can quickly become dangerous. If you are involved in a search for a missing person at risk, keep in mind that a person with dementia:

- Is not likely to be aware they are lost
- May not respond when their name is called
- Is likely to walk in a straight line until they become stuck
- Will not call out for help
- Do not follow a logical path
- Can be lost on foot, by car, by bus
- Might be frightened by searchers and try to hide
- Are unaware of the dangers around them

(833) 569-7651

lafound.lacounty.gov

LA Found is a county program that provides information, resources, and technologies for people with a cognitive impairment and at risk of wandering.