

STAYING CLOSE WHEN THE MIND SLIPS AWAY

How to connect with loved ones experiencing Alzheimer's, Dementia, FTD, or other cognitive decline

It's hard to know what to say when someone you love starts slipping away in front of you.

They might tell the same story three times in five minutes. They might forget your name or confuse you with someone else entirely. They might drift into memories that never quite happened—or tell you something with total conviction that doesn't line up with reality. You're left nodding, smiling, unsure whether to go along, correct them, change the subject, or just walk out to breathe.

There's no script for these moments. And no one tells you how to be with someone whose mind is changing.

This isn't just for primary caregivers, though they carry a sacred and exhausting load. This is for the rest of us, for friends, adult children, grandkids, neighbors, visitors, and for anyone who wants to stay close to someone whose mental faculties are fading. Whether it's Alzheimer's, vascular dementia, Lewy Body, or Frontotemporal Dementia (FTD), the truth is the same: there's still a person in there. And that person still longs for connection.

The question is, how do we stay connected when the rules of normal conversation start to break down?

1. Connection Over Correction

The single most important shift we can make is this:

Choose connection over correction.

In a culture that prizes facts and clarity, it can feel wrong—or even disrespectful—not to correct someone who's gotten something wrong. “No, it wasn't Tuesday. That happened last year.” “No, I'm not your brother—I'm your grandson.” “No, we already talked about that.”

But with cognitive decline, those corrections rarely help. Often, they confuse, shame, or agitate. You're pointing to a reality that may no longer exist for them—and asking them to step into it. That's not kindness. That's disorientation.

Instead, try to enter their reality, even just a little. If they think they're waiting for their (long-deceased) mother to pick them up from school, you can respond to the feeling underneath:

“You really loved your mom, huh?”

“Sounds like those were special days.”

“Tell me more about her.”

This doesn't mean you have to pretend or play-act forever. But it means tuning in to what they're trying to express emotionally, not just what they're saying factually. Underneath the confusion, there's often something real—grief, nostalgia, fear, loneliness, joy. That's where the doorway to connection lives.

2. Don't Be Afraid to Be Real—Just Be Gentle

You don't have to lie. You also don't have to say everything you know.

There's a middle ground between pretending and "setting the record straight." Sometimes, a calm and clear response does help. For example, when someone asks for the third time if their spouse is coming home today, and that spouse died years ago, you might say:

"You miss them, don't you?"

If they keep asking, you might say:

"They're not here today, but I'm here. Would it be okay if we sat together for a while?"

You're not obligated to go along with everything. Some days you'll have the capacity for patience and redirection. Some days you won't. That's okay. Being real matters too.

But when you do correct or redirect, do it gently—not to dominate the conversation or assert your "rightness," but to soothe, to ground, or to offer some soft structure.

3. When You're Confused, It's Okay to Say So

Sometimes they'll tell a story that trails off mid-sentence. Or speak with sudden intensity about something that doesn't quite track. You'll feel lost.

It's okay to say:

"Hmm... I'm not quite sure what you meant. Can you say it again?"

—or—

"I got a little confused—do you mean [this] or [that]?"

If they can't clarify, that's okay too. Offer warmth, a smile, a hand on the arm. Remember: even if the content of the conversation doesn't make sense, the emotional tone is still real.

You can also pivot without shame:

"You know, I love hearing your voice. Even when I don't understand everything, I'm just glad we're here together."

4. Let Silence Be a Bridge, not a Barrier

You don't have to fill the air. When words stop working, presence still matters.

Sit together and hum a tune. Look through old photos. Hold their hand. Have some coffee side by side. These moments may seem small, but to someone whose mind is scattered or fading, your calm presence is a lighthouse. You don't have to explain. You don't have to fix. Just be.

If you're not sure what to say, try:

"It's good to be with you."

"I'm glad we have this time."

"You're not alone."

5. The Grief Is Real—So Is the Love

There's a quiet heartbreak in watching someone you love disappear in slow motion.

Sometimes they're with you, sometimes not. Sometimes they're angry. Sometimes they sparkle for just a second and then drift away again.

You're allowed to grieve. Even in the midst of connection, even in the presence of joy—you can still feel that sadness, that loss, that ache for who they were.

But you're also allowed to love the person who's here now.

The version of them that sings when old songs come on. The version that still loves chocolate. The one who lights up when you walk in, even if they don't know why. The one who still deserves dignity, affection, and grace.

Your Practice Invitation

Here are a few reflections you might take with you as you prepare to see or talk to someone with cognitive decline:

- What would it look like to listen with my heart, not just my ears?
- Can I let go of the need to be understood, and just bring understanding?
- Where do I feel pressure to fix or correct—and can I soften there?
- What's one way I can stay connected, even if the conversation doesn't make sense?
- How can I let love lead today, even in the midst of confusion or grief?

There's no perfect way to do this. You won't always get it right. But if you keep showing up—with gentleness, humility, and openheartedness—you're giving a gift that transcends words.

You're saying, "You matter. I'm still here. And I see you—even when the rest of the world doesn't."

And that kind of love? It lingers. Even when memories don't.

"They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel."

—Maya Angelou