

The use of dolls in dementia care (doll therapy)



What is doll therapy?

The use of lifelike dolls or soft toy animals can have great benefits for some people with dementia, particularly those with more advanced dementia and those who have difficulty with verbal communication. It is sometimes known as doll therapy and is not merely ‘playing with a toy’ – it can have therapeutic benefits such as promoting relaxation and feelings of comfort and pleasure.

The benefits of doll therapy for people with dementia

There is evidence showing that the use of dolls, soft toys or other objects can be helpful for people with dementia who find it difficult to engage with others or who are restless, distressed or anxious. For example, it can improve their mood, wellbeing and ability to communicate; and create a sense of security and connection.

Some people with dementia get enjoyment from holding or interacting with a doll or soft toy animal, such as a cat or dog – or even just from having one nearby. It might remind them of a time when they had young children or a pet of their own, and create pleasant feelings of reminiscence or affection, even if they are unable to communicate them.

This can be particularly useful if the person experiences ‘sundowning’. This is a state of confusion and anxiety that typically occurs in the evening – for example, the person with dementia may feel a strong need to go home, even if they are already home, or to collect their child from school, even if they are grown up. Having a doll, soft toy or similar object to focus on at this time of day may ease these feelings of distress and insecurity.

Some family members find that giving the person with dementia a doll or soft toy animal can help them to connect with the outside world. It might encourage communication by prompting

conversations about the toy and their feelings towards it. They may enjoy showing other people the doll or soft toy and telling them about it.

It may also give them a renewed sense of purpose through the act of ‘caring for’ the doll or soft toy. They might, for instance, like to talk to it, brush its hair, wrap it in a blanket or put it to bed. This could lead to increased levels of activity and motivation and lift their mood.

Some people with dementia enjoy the physical sensation of holding something soothing and take comfort from cradling, cuddling or stroking the doll or toy animal. This may help to reduce distressed behaviour like shouting, fidgeting or pacing.

Dolls and soft toys can also be a good way to help the person with dementia connect with younger members of the family, such as grandchildren or, in the case of people with young onset dementia (where symptoms develop before the age of 65), their own children. Playing with, talking about or nurturing the toy together can help them interact with each other, whether verbally or non-verbally. This can be valuable both for the person with dementia and the child.

Tips for giving a doll or soft animal to the person you care for

- Introduce the doll or soft toy gradually. You could place it on a chair before the person enters the room. Watch to see how – and if – they respond
- You could offer the person a choice of different dolls or soft animals to pick from
- Some companies sell very realistic baby dolls and animated soft toy animals, which may be marketed as being for people with dementia. However, there is no need to make an expensive purchase – ordinary dolls and cuddly toys can be just as effective

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- Let the person discover the doll or soft toy in their own time
- If they show an interest, you could encourage them by saying things like, “Would you like to pick it up?” or, “Shall I put it on your lap?”
- If they show no interest in it, do not worry too much about drawing their attention to it. You can always try another day – but be aware that some people simply do not find dolls or soft toys engaging

Important things to consider

If the person engages with a doll or soft toy voluntarily and seems to be finding it beneficial, this could form part of their care plan and be tailored to their individual needs. This is also important when dolls or soft animals are introduced into a group setting such as a care home – it should not be assumed that every resident will find it helpful, and the specific needs of each person should be considered.

These are some other points to bear in mind.

- Not everyone will want to interact with a doll or soft animal. If the person shows no interest, do not press the doll or soft toy upon them
- Try to avoid using toys that make a noise – eg crying noises or barking – as this may cause distress for the person with dementia and the people around them, such as other care home residents
- Take care not to treat the person with dementia like a child – remember that this is a form of therapy, not just play
- It is important to discuss your plans to introduce a doll or soft toy with other members of the person’s family. Sometimes, family members feel that their relative is being patronised or

treated with indignity. They may also see them caring for their toy as evidence of how their condition is deteriorating, which may be upsetting. Explaining what you are doing, and the potential benefits, may help ease any concerns

- Some people with dementia become very attached to a doll or soft animal. They may be upset if children, other family members/friends, carers, or care home staff or residents pick it up. You can help to prevent this by putting the toy away if the person has visitors, or keeping it in their bedroom rather than bringing it into communal areas
- If the person with dementia has carers coming into their home or is in residential care, ensure that their care staff understand that the doll or soft toy is important to them so they can try to prevent it being misplaced or handled by other people
- If the person seems to believe that the toy is real – for example, referring to it as a ‘baby’ rather than a doll – do not try to correct them, as this may cause distress and confusion

Doll therapy and self-care

Sometimes, a person with dementia may start neglecting their own needs to prioritise the doll or soft animal – for instance, putting it in their bed while they sleep in a chair, or trying to give it their food.

Watch for these signs and consider how you could work around any issues. For example, you could keep the doll or animal in another place during mealtimes and encourage the person to interact with it early in the day rather than close to bedtime.

You could also introduce the idea of someone else ‘babysitting’ the doll or soft animal so the act of caring for it does not restrict the person from taking part in meaningful activities – you could suggest

Sources of support

If you are caring for someone with dementia or living with the condition yourself, you can register for our free online sessions, ‘Dementia: what next?’ Hosted by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses, they cover topics like types of dementia, symptoms, financial and legal issues and planning for the future. Sign up at

👉 dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next

To speak to an Admiral Nurse on our free Helpline, call **0800 888 6678** (Monday-Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm, every day except 25th December) or email 👉 helpline@dementiauk.org

If you prefer, you can book a phone or video call with an Admiral Nurse at a time to suit you: please visit 👉 dementiauk.org/book

Dementia UK resources

Advance Care Plans

👉 dementiauk.org/advance-care-planning

Coping with distress

👉 dementiauk.org/coping-with-distress

Creating a life story for a person with dementia

👉 dementiauk.org/creating-a-life-story

Dealing with restlessness

👉 dementiauk.org/dealing-with-restlessness

Good habits for bedtime

👉 dementiauk.org/good-habits-for-bedtime



Learning disabilities and dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/learning-disabilities

Managing anxiety and depression in a person with dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/managing-anxiety

Meaningful activities for a person with dementia

➤ dementiauk.org/meaningful-activities-for-a-person-with-dementia

Sundowning

➤ dementiauk.org/sundowning

Tips for better communication

➤ dementiauk.org/tips-for-better-communication

Young onset dementia section

dementiauk.org/young-onset-dementia

**To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse
about any aspect of dementia:**

Contact our Helpline:
0800 888 6678 or [👉 helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

Book a virtual appointment:
[👉 dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

**Our charity relies entirely on donations to fund our
life-changing work. If you would like to donate to help us
support more families:**

- Call **0300 365 5500**
- Visit [👉 dementiauk.org/donate](https://dementiauk.org/donate)
- Scan the QR code

Thank you.



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Helping families face dementia



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