

Information for home care workers

Trauma and dementia: What do I need to know?

Many people with dementia have at some stage in their life been affected by trauma, such as:

- a serious accident, war, or a fire or flood
- an assault or emotional abuse
- severe illness or losing someone close to them

Sometimes, people with dementia are physically, sexually or emotionally abused by their family members or carers. People with dementia may need your help to understand their reactions to trauma and get professional help.

Dementia can make coping with trauma difficult

For people living with dementia, the loss of memories, independence and relationships can be very stressful. This can make it harder for them to cope with trauma. For some people, as more recent memories fade, memories of past traumas can become stronger and more upsetting.

People with dementia can find it hard to:

- explain how they are feeling and ask for help
- make sense of painful feelings and memories
- calm down when they have bad memories, thoughts or feelings
- feel safe if they are confused and can't recognise people or their surroundings

“I’ve noticed it’s important for Ruby to choose her own clothes. She’s calmer then. Otherwise, she is reminded of a bad time in her past when she didn’t have this control.”



How do I know if someone is affected by trauma?

The symptoms of trauma and dementia can often look the same. Common signs include:

1. Physical signs
 - feeling tired all the time, not sleeping well
 - upset stomach or loss of appetite
2. Emotional signs
 - appearing down or crying
 - tense and on edge - restless, anxious, irritable
 - difficulty managing feelings - sudden emotional outbursts, physical or verbal aggression
3. Behavioural signs
 - finding it hard to concentrate or remember things
 - spending more time alone
 - stressed by changes in routine or having to make decisions

What can I do to help?

Ask yourself what is happening for this person, and whether trauma may be affecting them. Look for information in their history or care plan.

If you notice these problems are happening for more than two weeks and stopping the person from participating in daily routines and activities, or causing distress, get help for the person. Talk to your manager, or suggest a referral to a doctor or geriatrician.

Mental health support can help even people with severe dementia. It's never too late for a person to get help.

Remember to look after yourself.

Caring for someone with trauma can affect you over time. If you have a difficult day or are upset by an experience with a person you are caring for, talk to a manager, workmate, friend or family member you trust.

