

Arts and Cultural Venues

Arts and cultural venues have a major role to play in welcoming and accommodating people living with dementia because they provide access to programs that engage individuals with the arts and a creative outlet.



What is Dementia?

Dementia is an overall term that describes a wide range of symptoms associated with a decline in memory or other thinking skills severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities. Dementia has many causes. Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia, is a disease of the brain that leads to changes with memory, thinking, and behavior. Alzheimer's and other dementias are not a normal part of aging.

Early signs of Dementia

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Challenges in planning or solving problems
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure
- Confusion with time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
- New problems with words in speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood and personality

Dementia-Friendly Communication

- Treat the person with dignity and respect.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Use a gentle and relaxed tone.
- Use shorter simple sentences, and ask one question at a time.
- Avoid arguing with or embarrassing the person.
- Encourage nonverbal communication.
- Be aware of your body language: smile and make eye contact at eye-level.
- Seek to understand the person's reality and feelings.
- Apologize and redirect to another environment or topic as needed.

How Could Dementia Affect Someone's Visit to your Arts Venue?

The effects of dementia differ from person to person, but someone living with dementia may:

- Find it difficult to get to your venue or find their way around.
- Respond to a performance or installation in an unexpected way.
- Struggle to follow a complex story or read and understand an exhibition guide
- Find it easier to interact with art using their senses, for example, by looking at visual art, handling objects or listening to music.
- Worry about how staff, volunteers or other visitors will react to their symptoms.
- In addition, people may have other health issues alongside dementia, such as, impaired hearing or mobility problems that could affect their ability to get around your venue or appreciate the programming.

Making Your Arts Venue Dementia-Friendly

- **Be Proactive:** Identify the needs and wishes of people living with dementia, their families and care partners; think about how you can meet these needs.
- **Raise awareness:** Make sure your staff and volunteers understand dementia, how it can affect people's ability to access your venue and the way they experience the arts.
- **Make Connections:** Contact organizations that support people living with dementia and care partners to explore opportunities for consultation, training, or collaborative projects.
- **Keep it Simple:** Small changes, such as, having extra volunteers on hand, providing a quiet space, or giving people more detailed information before they visit can make a big difference.

Incorporating Dementia-Friendly Program Elements

Consider ways to compliment your program with events or activities specifically for people living with dementia, for example:

- Relaxed performances or screenings that create a more conducive environment. For example, this might include keeping the house lights slightly turned up, reducing the volume and giving people freedom to move around.
- Interactive gallery/exhibition tours or discussions for people living with dementia, facilitated by trained staff or volunteers, such as ['Meet me at the MoMA' \(Museum of Modern Art, New York\)](#) and the [Royal Academy's monthly 'Coffee and Conversation' sessions](#).
- Bringing together people living with dementia and musicians/writers/artists to facilitate the creation of a new performance, artwork or exhibition.
- Hosting participatory sessions for people living with dementia – examples include [Rambert's Dance for Dementia](#) and the [Victoria and Albert Museum's Art and Expression workshops](#).
- Remember that the appreciation of art is not purely intellectual, but also involves the emotions and the senses – sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. Shifting attention to the senses can be a good way to support people living with dementia to engage with your program. Consider:
 - Whether there is anything in your collection that can be handled and touched.
 - How you could provide innovative and spontaneous opportunities to engage.
 - Whether anything could be paired with music.

Creating a Dementia-Friendly Physical Space

Small changes in a physical space can make a big difference in making an environment feel safe to someone living with dementia. A welcoming environment (both indoors and outdoors) helps a person living with dementia continue to access your venue. There are many best practices you can consider to improve access for people living with dementia. Most are relatively low cost and can benefit everyone, including people living with dementia.

- Entrances should be clearly visible and understood as an entrance. Make sure that glass doors are clearly marked.
- Signage for finding your way around should be clear, should use bold type, and should have contrast between the words and the background. Alongside text, use a range of cues and clues including symbols or images.
- Lighting at entrances should be high powered and include natural light when possible. Avoid pools of bright light and deep shadows.
- Flooring should be plain, not shiny, and not slippery. Pathways should be wide and free of clutter.
- Provide a quiet seating area where people can go if they are finding it difficult to cope with noise and other distractions.
- A family/unisex restroom will allow someone to be assisted without causing embarrassment to them or another user.

Support Employee Care Partners

- Take a holistic approach to employee well-being.
- Create an organization-wide understanding of the challenges care partners face.
- Help employees connect to available community resources and benefits available.
- Gather detailed information about the kind of leave policies, benefits and programs employers have in place to support care partners.
- Establish policies and practices supportive to care partners.
- Measure how well your support is working by surveying employees.

References

Know the 10 Warning Signs

www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_know_the_10_signs.asp

Dementia-friendly arts

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-involved/dementia-friendly-communities/organisations/dementia-friendly-arts-venues>

Arts & Culture

<https://www.giaging.org/issues/arts-culture/>

Dementia Friends Pennsylvania

<https://www.dementiafriendspa.org/>

AARP: Supporting Caregivers in the Workplace: A Practical Guide for Employers

<https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/work/job-search/2019/02/NEBGH-caregiving-practical-guide.pdf>

Art and cultural venues are just one important part of the community. Working alongside other sectors can help the whole community become more dementia friendly. Learn more at dfamerica.org.



Adapted from ACT on Alzheimer's® developed tools and resources.