



## Becoming Dementia Friendly

### KEY POINTS

- Dementia sufferers experience confusion and can be unresponsive
- Try to avoid open ended questions
- If possible provide a separate, quiet area for the dementia sufferer and someone to sit with them
- The Virtual Dementia Tour allows people to empathise with how a dementia sufferer is feeling
- SAIF Members qualify for reduced costs on the Virtual Dementia Tour

### **What happens after the death of a person who has been caring for their loved one suffering with dementia? As a funeral director, how can you best help the family?**

Often families have been in denial about dementia and it's severity for the remaining family member. The caregiver who has passed away likely has spent many years hiding the severity from the rest of the family. In fact, they commonly do such a great job of doing this that it's a shock to the family when the depth of the dementia becomes apparent.

Here are three scenarios of what can happen when organising the funeral:

1. *The family comes to the funeral home and the spouse with dementia is basically unresponsive, confused and at times agitated.*

It is best that one of the funeral home staff take the person with dementia to another area of the facility and offer tea, quiet and if possible a soothing conversation.

It is unnecessary for the person with dementia to be in the final decision making for their loved one unless they expressly want to. Decisions are difficult for those with dementia. The part of their brain that processes complex information such as the pragmatics of the service, selecting a casket or urn, simply adds to the confusion.

If you know in advance that the spouse has a cognitive impairment, it would be nice to reassure the family that you will have someone at the funeral home to keep them company as the decisions are made. As

mentioned above, it's not necessary to say anything about the confused family member. Simply offer tea and comfort in another room.

2. *The spouse comes to the funeral home alone to make decisions about the service and it is clear that there is a bit of confusion.*

It is seen in the inability to make a decision, unable to follow the conversation, asking the same question over and over and high startle response. It becomes clear that there is a lack of understanding.

In the Virtual Dementia Tour, this inability to understand spoken word and difficulty processing new environments and situations is clearly demonstrated. No matter how hard you try, you will find yourself frustrated.

When it's clear that this is the situation, try to get the name of another family member who can either be on the phone or at another appointment. This is not a way to remove the person with dementia from the decisions but a more compassionate way to assist in the decisions that have to be made.

If there is no other family present, a person with dementia does best when they are reinforced and then move on to the next thing. For instance: "Sir, for the service, what song would you like to be played?"



This is an open ended sentence and it's likely that he won't be able to answer but will try to search. The more he searches his brain for the answer, the worse it gets.

When this happens, simply offer specific names of songs commonly used in the loved ones age group. Most likely he can select from one of those. If not, just select one and ask again later if that works.

The same method follows throughout the decision making process. Try not to ask open ended questions.

*3. The whole family shows up to make the decisions and it's clear they are ignoring the person with dementia completely even though it is their spouse who has passed away.*

In fact, the family becomes loud and argumentative about decisions and the person with dementia feels threatened and withdraws. It is important to specifically ask the person with dementia if they would like some tea and completely remove them from the toxic environment.

Another approach is to specifically ask them to choose between two memorial books to use at the service for example. Both approaches honour the person with dementia and give no credence to the family in turmoil.

During the Virtual Dementia Tour we commonly see participants completely withdraw and be unresponsive during the tour. The

bombardment of sights, sounds and inability to process information makes it easier for some people to turn inward.

Feeling overwhelmed by the environment is one of the hallmarks of this disease. Going the extra mile to insure the person isn't scapegoated in this difficult time by a family who has either denied the disease process or is unable to face the reality goes a long way to smooth this difficult time.

The Virtual Dementia Tour is designed give carers the opportunity to experience what dementia is like. This personal approach to sensitivity makes all the difference in helping those involved cope with the trauma of the death of a loved one. Taking just a moment to move past our comfort zone and feel the impact of the disease helps everyone serve the families and most importantly, the person living with this disease.

More than one million people in 17 different countries have experienced the Virtual Dementia Tour.

**SAIF thanks P.K. Beville, M.S, Founder and CEO Second Wind Dreams for this article.**

Geriatric specialist, P.K. Beville authored and invented the Virtual Dementia Tour as her post-graduate work. This patented program offers hope by providing practical ways to create an environment that supports the disease and increases understanding.

Offering educational programs including its flagship, sensitivity training, the Virtual Dementia Tour<sup>®</sup> through Training2Care UK Ltd (the only licensed company in the UK.



**VIRTUAL DEMENTIA TOUR<sup>®</sup>**  
YOUR WINDOW INTO THEIR WORLD

