

Sometimes when family and friends visit conversation may become a little awkward when one of the most natural ways to greet each other is to start by asking, 'How are you?' While this question is universally accepted, for a person living with dementia the question may be taken quite literally, and they are likely to share aches and pains, or they may find the question too difficult to respond to. Either way continuing with a positive conversation may prove challenging.

Before beginning a conversation, think through how you can use the time to deepen the relationship. The short-term investment you make in shifting your language may provide an experience that is uplifting and improve positive relationships.

Instead of asking this specific question, help support the persons self-esteem by making them feel special. A conversation starter may include 'It's great to talk with you,' or 'It's fantastic to see you again.' This allows the person to feel they are special and there is no expectation for a precise reply.

As the conversation progresses, be mindful of asking factual and 'doing' questions such as, 'How was your day?' 'What have you been doing?' or 'What are you doing tomorrow?' Sometimes these questions can cause agitation or withdrawal.

Try using different words, if they don't understand what you have said the first time. Rather than asking 'what would you like to drink?' try asking 'would you like a cup of tea?

Put Yourself in Their Shoes:

Here I am surrounded by people, but feeling alone, I seem to have lost my position in life: everyone else is doing what I used to do, and what I should be doing. I want things to be different, but sometimes I can't remember what I have done or where I have been. I need to feel useful, and I want to go back to my old life, but I don't know how.

So, when you ask me: 'how my day was' 'how am I feeling' 'what I have been doing' or even 'what will I be doing next week', they remind me of a life I no longer know. In trying to protect myself, I may give you an abrupt answer or I may even get angry.

Instead of asking me questions, which I can no longer answer, try to understand what things make me feel special and remind me of the important parts of the day that may be stored in my long-term memory.

You may tell me about your day but for me to respond it needs to be relevant to me, so I feel included. Try to change the language from what you would normally use to make it more understandable and relevant to me. Try to take the time to understand my current situation and think of my emotional needs to feel needed and useful. Look for a way to help build my self-esteem.