

Adapting for Dementia: 12 Helpful Tips

By Barbara J. Newman

If there is a “most asked” question I get these days from pastors and other ministry leaders, this one is it: “How do we respond when members of our congregation are diagnosed with dementia?”

So often family members and caregivers watch as the church community falls away from supporting and including people with dementia. Years of relationship are often tossed by the wayside as congregation members no longer know how to interact with a friend, leader, mentor, or loved member of the community as they begin to display behaviors that seem so out of character. If only there were some sort of tool—some way to continue to be in community with one another . . .

Here is the good news: now THERE IS! While the TOGETHER Bible Studies developed by Friendship Ministries can be used in a variety of settings, one exciting opportunity involves providing continued learning and Bible study for and with persons with dementia. As an author and editor of the TOGETHER series, it was my privilege to pilot an eight-week unit in two formats:

- Small Group Adult Bible Study – We had a group of 4-6 adults, one of whom experiences dementia.
- Adult Bible Study for Persons With Dementia – We had a group of 15-20 individuals who live in a residential placement due to the impact of dementia. There were 2-4 facilitators with this group each of the eight weeks.

Our meetings together were rich and varied and often very moving. If you are interested in more details, please check out this article: [*Congregations and Persons with Dementia: A Story and Ideas to Try*](#). It’s my prayer that both the article and the tips below may give you the courage and the motivation you need to use TOGETHER Bible studies with people living with dementia in your own church or community.

Tip 1: Learn the Basics about Dementia.

We understand that sometimes it can be difficult to enter into relationship with someone when the road map for interaction seems so different from the map we typically use. Before your sessions together, become familiar with key features of dementia and observe others who are able to interact comfortably with persons who have dementia. Remember also that this disease progresses in stages, so your group may include people of varying abilities, and these abilities may change over the course of several months.

Always remember, you are NOT entering into a Bible Study experience with a diagnosis; you ARE entering into an experience with a person. Click around on the following links to get some basic background information for your interaction roadmap. You don't need to be an expert on dementia to be in a Bible study with people with memory loss. But having at least some information may improve the experience as you learn alongside Audrey or Sue or John or Charles.

Recommended Websites: [Alzheimer's Association](#), [Dementia Friendly America](#)

Recommended Videos:

- [How Alzheimer's Destroys the Brain](#) by CNN (1 1/2 minutes)
- Portions from [a course on disability awareness for congregations](#) (log in as a guest to access):
 - [Understanding Dementia](#) (16 minutes)
 - [Strategies for Dementia](#) (23 minutes)
 - [Personalized Plans for Dementia](#) (13 minutes)

Recommended Article: [Communication Tips When Interacting with Dementia Patients](#)

Tip 2: Become Familiar with the TOGETHER Bible Study Curriculum.

You will notice that the curriculum is divided into two different tracks. Track 1 is designed for groups where at least half the group members experience some type of intellectual disability. Track 2 is designed for a typical adult small group where only 1-3 of the group members have some sort of learning difference. While there are many similarities between the two tracks, you will find key differences as well:

- Questions in the first track are often answerable by yes and no (or thumbs up, thumbs down). In the second track, questions are more challenging and may demand more abstract thinking.
- Visual cues and hands-on activities are a more common part of the first track than the second.
- Dramas that appear in the first track may be transformed into readers' theaters for the second track.

You may decide to pick and choose activities or ideas from both tracks as you walk through the sessions each week. Simply pull up the two versions of the week's session and compare the activities. Then decide what best fits the interests, functioning level, and movement options within your group. (Note: If you are using this as part of a more typical adult small group and including only one member with dementia, it may be best to stick with the Adult Small Group track so all group members find the materials challenging and meaningful.)

Tip 3: Consider Your Song Choices.

While the TOGETHER materials provide great song options, many persons with dementia will enjoy treasured and well-loved songs from their past. Open your computer to YouTube. Ask for song requests or consider some songs you suspect participants will know and love from church services many years ago. When you search for songs in YouTube, the top couple of choices often give you both music and lyrics. Push play and allow your group to sing along. Here are some of the favorites from within the dementia Bible study pilot group:

- [My Jesus I Love Thee](#)
- [Oh How I Love Jesus](#)
- [Amazing Grace](#)
- [When Peace Like a River \(It Is Well\)](#)

Tip 4: Get Ready to Hit "Pause".

TOGETHER curriculum materials make extensive use of videos. So make sure you are meeting in a place where you have access to a larger-sized view of the videos, and get ready to hit "pause."

In addition to pauses already suggested by the video, you may want to pause:

- to point out the facial expression of a character in the Bible video.
- to re-establish joint attention to the materials when some minds seem to be wandering.
- when you notice that one group member is reacting to part of the video. Find out what that person noticed!
- when your group needs more time than the 4-5 second window to respond.

Tip 5: Pictures, Pictures, Pictures!

The materials provide many pictures and printables, however you may want to find additional pictures about a topic or key point in the lesson. Going to an image search site will often allow you to copy and paste several images to a document that you can run off on a printer. For example, one lesson included a story from a war setting. In order to set that stage, I ran off a sheet of images including an army tank, a person in uniform, and an army barracks. Before showing the video, I showed the pictures to the individuals in the group.

Pairing visuals with words seems to increase the chance that people will be able to interact with the materials. It also gives you a response option that does not involve words. Structuring questions that can be answered by pointing to one of the pictures can be a great way for a person to interact without having to pull up the spoken words. Google provides an easy [search engine](#) that you may find helpful.

Tip 6: Display Visuals in Accessible Ways.

Though the TOGETHER materials include many images on the screen or on printable documents, some participants may need these visuals up close, directly in front of their eyes. To meet this need, try the following strategies:

- Make sure the individuals with dementia are seated so that they directly face the screen or the speaker.

- When possible, make copies of pictures that can be moved up closer to an individual.
- Some individuals may do best with a “personal showing” of the video. While you are showing the video on the large screen, also consider having another group member show it concurrently on a device such as an iPad for individuals who need up close visuals. Just make sure the sound is turned off on the secondary device!

Tip 7: Consider Multiple Areas of Disability.

As we age, our bodies become more fragile. You may have group members with memory issues, but you may also have group members who have additional areas of varied abilities.

- Is the sound loud enough for persons with hearing loss?
- Do you need to adapt some activities for people with mobility issues?
- Do you have group members who are tightly connected with a schedule and will need to have that displayed visually each week?
- Would a reserved seat keep social anxiety down for one or more group members?

As you think through these and other questions that may pertain to your group, check out *Adapting the Sessions to the Needs of Your Group* for more concrete suggestions.

Tip 8: Go With the Strengths of Your Group.

Since memory often fades from present to the past, an individual’s experiences as a young person may be their most vibrant memories. If you know or suspect that an individual was fortunate enough to have weekly routines in church, such as reciting the Lord’s Prayer or the Apostle’s Creed, get ready to include those in your time together. In fact, if a group member often participated in Bible study, asking someone to open or close in prayer may be very comfortable—even after conversational speech has become very limited. Reciting familiar Bible verses or singing the Doxology may also be great things to include each week.

While it may seem that people with dementia would be unable to participate in these very verbal activities, get ready for a big surprise!

Tip 9: Always Consider a Second or Third Layer of Sensory Experience When Possible.

It's great to greet someone and shake hands, but it will be even better if everyone wears a nametag. It's wonderful to pray with someone, but it's even better when you cover that person with a prayer shawl or ask to anoint that person with oil as you pray. (Do be sure that the individual is comfortable with these actions.) Singing a song is great, but displaying the lyrics and having ribbons to wave as an option may help someone participate in a new way.

Weaving in these kinds of tools and practices each week will increase the chance for participation by all.

Tip 10: Serve One Another in the Group.

We all enjoy chances to be the giver instead of the one who is always given to! Consider some of the following ways group members can serve each other:

- Pass an item from one person to another within the group. For example, have a passable snack that gives each person a chance to serve the one sitting next to him or her. Or pass an object from person to person (such as a cross or picture of Jesus); as each person hands off to the next, the group can say "Jesus loves you, _____." A passing activity like this gives individuals a chance to bring a blessing to a person close by.
- Consider taking your nametags off at the end each session and attaching each of them to a note card that says "Pray For" on the top. Put those notecards in a hat or basket and let group members take turns pulling one out and agreeing to pray for that person throughout the week.
- During prayer time, have a group member hold the prayer shawl as a way to represent a group of people you may be praying for together.

- These are just examples. As you work together, look for as many ways as possible of involving each group member in serving others—both in the group and beyond.

Tip 11: Save the Take It Home Materials to Use as a Review.

The curriculum supplies *Take It Home* cards or pages each week. Make sure you save a few sets so that you can use the pictures to help group members recall past sessions. Remember, displaying one copy in front of the group may not be enough. Adults in your group will need to see the pictures up close to engage with them.

Tip 12: Pray.

As you implement these tips and use this exciting tool for persons with and without dementia, remember to cover your time in prayer. When you open God's Word together, invite and expect the Holy Spirit to speak with and through the persons gathered. Come expecting to learn with and from each person present.

Need more help or ideas? Want to brainstorm with someone? [Contact us](#). We are here to help!