



STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIPS: A CONVERSATION GUIDE

SUMMARY

The purpose of this conversation guide is to provide tips and strategies that people living with dementia and their friends can use to commit to their friendships in meaningful ways.

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How To Use This Conversation Guide

This resource is for people who have friends living with dementia, people with dementia themselves, family members, and anyone working in dementia care. By using the strategies included here, we hope that you can create supportive spaces within your relationships to both honour and continue your long-term commitment to your friendship. These strategies allow friends to acknowledge that, despite changes in memory and behaviour, someone living with dementia is a person who has thoughts, feelings, and strengths. Support from friends helps to ensure mutually enjoyable experiences are maintained.

Not all the recommendations will be relevant for every friendship, so use what makes sense to you to help maintain your relationship. Regardless of how things may change or stay the same, continuing to build deep bonds can bring laughter, joy, and meaning to your lives.

Before you get started, here is a suggestion on how to use this information to support your continued friendship. Start by watching one or more of the three videos on our website: www.dementiaandfriendship.ca

These videos highlight the gifts and meanings of friendships, the role of leisure, and strategies for maintaining friendships. After watching each video, use the accompanying guide that contains related tips and questions to engage in a guided conversation with your friend.

Consider When, Where and How

An important consideration before starting a conversation about your friendship is when, where and how to proceed. For example, it is valuable to think about when to have a conversation. Should it be scheduled or spontaneous? Where to talk is just as important. Should you ask your friend questions in a public or private setting? Equally important is how. Should you discuss all the questions at once or over a period time?

Here are some examples of DOs and DON'Ts for when, where and how to sustain friendship in dementia:

WHEN:

- ✓ DO You're enjoying a beverage in the clubhouse after a round of golf and you ask your friend, "Can we take a few minutes to talk about our friendship?"
- ✗ DON'T You are playing the front 9 at a nearby golf course. Your friend is getting ready to tee off and you ask, "How can we maintain our friendship?"

In the second scenario, your friend may be too distracted while focusing on the ball to have a deep conversation. When you engage in these conversations, it is recommended that you choose a time when you don't have to focus on anything else. The conversation will flow better in the first scenario.

WHERE:

- ✓ DO You're taking a drive in the country enjoying a relaxing time together and you ask, "What makes our friendship meaningful to you?"
- ✗ DON'T You're in the grocery store together while your friend picks up a few items and you ask, "What makes our friendship meaningful to you?"

These conversations are personal in nature and in the second scenario, it may feel uncomfortable to have such a deep conversation when others are around. Finding a private location may make it easier to be open and honest with each other.

It may also be noisy and hard to hear each other in the second scenario. Difficulty tuning out other sounds and conversations may make it more challenging to focus on the questions.

HOW:

- ✓ DO You make plans to meet your friend at the park to go over the questions. After every 3 - 4 questions, you check in to see if your friend would like to continue or if they need a break.

X DON'T You make plans to meet your friend at the park to go over the questions. After a couple hours, your friend seems tired, but you press on because you want to know everything you can to support your friend.

Although it is not surprising that you want to take every opportunity to find out how you can support your friend, don't put pressure on each other to talk about everything all at once. It is important to be a good listener and understand what your friend needs from you. Together you may choose to focus on only a couple questions as others may not be relevant to you.

A Conversation Guide for Maintaining Friendships

The following guide is about strategies for maintaining friendships. This conversation guide includes tips on having conversations with your friend and questions to help you get started. Additionally, at the end of this guide you will find a “pocket” conversation starter including tips for more specific conversations that you can download and print for use during your chats.

Tips for Starting a Conversation:

- Give permission for your friend to ask questions; some people may find it difficult to start a conversation, and this may provide an opening
- Start conversations early, soon after a diagnosis
- Be open and honest with each other
- Put your trust in one another; promise to keep your conversations private
- Be empathetic and compassionate; listen actively and do not correct or criticize
- Do not assume what others are thinking even though you may have been friends for years and there may be certain expectations with older friends
- Friends may need to take initiative to have conversations
- Try to have in-person conversations so you can pick up on body language and intentions
- You may want to sit side-by-side to reduce anxiety, like sitting on a park bench
- Go to a familiar place to have your conversation; it may reduce anxiety and create a sense of safety

The most important thing is to be flexible and keep our ‘Tips for Starting a Conversation’ in mind. It is also important to consider the situation and timing of engaging in these discussions. Sometimes all a friend wants is your company.

Strategies for Maintaining Friendships

When trying to maintain friendships that can withstand changes brought about by a diagnosis of dementia, it is important to adapt and manage changes to your relationship. Some ways to adapt include prioritizing your friendship, shifting ways of thinking about your friendship, and addressing change through practical strategies.

Tips for maintaining friendships:

- Do not be a gate keeper. Share information openly and honestly with your friend to continue to build a trusting relationship
- Be there and be supportive. Practice patience and kindness
- Anticipate needs if possible and step in to provide support when needed
- Be persistent about maintaining your friendship. Show friends you care and that they are not alone. Motivation may be needed from you to encourage a friend with dementia
- Draw on support from others (e.g., consider inviting another close friend to come along)
- Use positive language and maintain respect and dignity. Try not to correct your friend if they make a mistake
- Value each other's contributions to your friendship. Even if your friendship has changed, it is still meaningful
- Accept the person as they are and treat them the same as you did
- Live in the moment
- Slow down to accommodate any changes
- Prioritize your friend's needs over your own emotions (e.g., you might be having a good time at an event, but if you sense your friend is struggling and needs to leave, consider their needs over yours)
- Focus on strengths and abilities, not losses
- Look out for the physical and emotional safety of your friend with dementia
- Don't make assumptions about how dementia will change your friend. Dementia does not affect everyone the same way
- Friendships are individual and therefore need to be treated differently

Questions for maintaining friendships:

1. How can I support you to continue making use of your skills and strengths?
(Do not just ask this one time only...keep checking in)
2. How can we maintain our connection with one another on a regular basis, so we don't lose touch (e.g., talk on the phone or over the internet, go for coffee, talk about family)?
3. How can we continue to have a mutual relationship? How can we rely on each other?
4. When we are in public and you need me to step in for you, how will I know? What is "our" signal?
5. Do you still want to make decisions, or would you like me to make some for us? (e.g., deciding on what and where to eat for lunch) Are there decisions that are really important for you to continue to make? How can I help you? What do I do if I notice you're starting to make decisions that are not like you?
6. What can I do for you today? AND what can I do for you ongoing?
7. How do we need to change our time together? What can stay the same?
8. How can we continue to bring laughter, joy, and meaning to our lives?
9. Where do you feel safe and able to be yourself? What can I do to help you feel safe?

Conversations for Discussing Friendship and Dementia Cue Cards



Conversation Starter

Questions for maintaining friendships

1. How can I support you to continue making use of your skills and strengths? (Do not just ask this one time only...keep checking in)
2. How can we maintain our connection with one another on a regular basis so we don't lose touch (e.g., talk on the phone or over the internet, go for coffee, talk about family)?
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10 tips for a general conversation

1. Give permission for your friend to ask questions; some people may find it difficult to start a conversation, and this may provide an opening.
2. Start conversations early, soon after a diagnosis.
3. Be open and honest with each other.
4. Put your trust in one another; promise to keep your conversations private.
5. Be empathetic and compassionate; listen actively and do not correct or criticize.
6. Do not assume what others are thinking even though you may have been friends for years and there may be certain expectations with older friends.
7. Friends may need to take initiative to have conversations.
8. Try to have in-person conversations so you can pick up on body language and intentions.
9. You may want to sit side-by-side to reduce anxiety, like sitting on a park bench.
10. Go to a familiar place to have your conversation; it may reduce anxiety and create a sense of safety.

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