



TIPS TO USE WHEN WORKING WITH Newcomers Who Have Alzheimer's Disease

This tip sheet was developed using resources from the Alzheimer's Society of Canada, the Alzheimer's Society of the United Kingdom, the Alzheimer's Association of the United States, Dementia Support Toronto, Johns Hopkins Medicine, and the Mayo Clinic.

The Alzheimer's Society of Canada defines Alzheimer's disease as "a chronic neurodegenerative disease that destroys brain cells, causing thinking ability and memory to decline over time". Although Alzheimer's disease is irreversible and incurable, it is *not* an inevitable part of the aging process. Settlement workers may work with senior clients who are forgetful or become disoriented but do not have Alzheimer's.

Alzheimer's disease is not the only form of dementia that newcomer clients may experience. While Alzheimer's accounts for approximately 60-80% of dementia diagnoses,² other forms of dementia include Lewy body, vascular, frontotemporal, Huntington's disease, and Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome³. People with Parkinson's disease may also develop dementia⁴. Although most people diagnosed with Alzheimer's are aged 65+⁵, dementia does not only impact seniors. For example, young-onset Alzheimer's can affect people in their 30s-50s and the first symptoms of Huntington's disease usually appear in this same age range. Because we know that Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia, this tip sheet focuses on assisting clients with that diagnosis. Researching the medical, behavioural and psychological impacts of other dementias will better enable service providers to support a cross section of senior clients.

1 Alzheimer's Society of Canada, [What is Alzheimer's disease?](#) | Alzheimer Society of Canada

2 Ibid.

3 Alzheimer's Association of the United States, [What is Dementia? Symptoms, Causes & Treatment](#) | [alz.org](#)

4 Johns Hopkins Medicine, [Parkinson's Disease and Dementia](#) | Johns Hopkins Medicine

5 Mayo Clinic, [Young-onset Alzheimer's: When symptoms begin before age 65](#) - Mayo Clinic

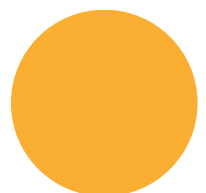
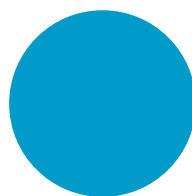
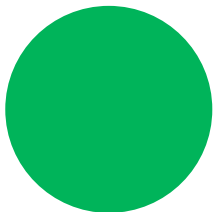
Please refer to the list below for some essential tips on working with clients who have Alzheimer's disease.

- **When working with a client who has Alzheimer's, try to stick to a routine.** If your building has multiple entrances, direct them to or greet them at the same one each time you meet. If you began your first meetings at a certain time of day or by talking about their family and hobbies, start subsequent meetings the same way.
- **If you have filled out paperwork or answered questions in a specific order in the past, try to replicate that order at your next meeting.** Routine helps people with Alzheimer's to feel more confident and in control of their environment.
- **When working with a client who has Alzheimer's, remove distractions.** Calm and well-lit environments with no or minimal distractions are the best settings when meeting with clients. Try to eliminate background noise, like the TV or radio.
- **Research shows that people with Alzheimer's may revert to their first language over time** ⁶. This can be true of clients who have lived in Canada and spoken English or French as an additional language for decades. It may be necessary to have a family member accompany the client to meetings or to integrate the use of translation apps or an interpreter in your meetings.
- **Do what you can to fight the depression and isolation that clients may experience.** Settlement workers know that the experience of coming to Canada and being away from one's family or culture can have significant mental health impacts. For clients with Alzheimer's, they may feel doubly isolated due to changes in their brain that make communication and socializing difficult. Additionally, it is estimated that up to 40% of people with Alzheimer's suffer from "significant depression" ⁷. Setting up a conversation circle or multicultural support group for clients with dementia can provide a much-needed lifeline – one that clients may not have access to elsewhere in their city or area.

⁶ Alzheimer's Society of the United Kingdom, [Losing your English: 'Reverting' to your mother tongue as dementia progresses](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk) | Alzheimer's Society ([alzheimers.org.uk](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk))

⁷ Alzheimer's Association of the United States, [Depression](https://www.alz.org) | Alzheimer's Association

- **In the later stages of the disease, Alzheimer's can impact the use of both fine and gross motor skills⁸.** Over time, dementia may impact a client's ability to do things like walk, eat, type, use a computer mouse or hold a pen⁹. For this reason, it is recommended that you reflect carefully on the format of services offered to a client with Alzheimer's. For example, an in-person conversation circle in a well-lit room where they are better able to read body language and facial expressions will likely be a better fit than a virtual conversation circle.
- **Finish one topic before moving on to the next and avoid asking too many questions in rapid succession.** For example, if you know a client wants to discuss both language classes and childcare options for their grandchildren at your next meeting, answer all of their questions about language classes before introducing the topic of your agency's on-site daycare.
- **Avoid judgment.** Using phrases like "Don't you remember?" or "How could you have forgotten?" does not encourage someone with Alzheimer's to better recall something next time. Instead, these phrases are more likely to trigger shame and frustration and should be avoided.
- **Do as much as possible before you meet with the client.** For example, if there is a form the client needs to fill out, let the client know ahead of time that you will be discussing the form at your meeting. Print off a copy and go through the form with them instead of referring them to a site or asking them to fill it out before arriving. This will help the client to better understand the information and provides them and their caregivers an opportunity to ask questions in real time.



- **Keep as many ties as you can to the client's life before Alzheimer's.** It is best for the client and their caregivers if the client remains as connected as possible to who they were before the diagnosis. For instance, if a client loves games, you can recommend adaptations of popular card games and board games. These include snakes and ladders and Scrabble, which can be ordered with large print playing pieces. Games like bingo, dominoes and word searches also work well for people with dementia as they do not involve recalling complex information. **Research tells us that mahjong¹⁰ and shiritori¹¹, in addition to similar games like gomoku and flying chess, have been found to help people maintain cognitive abilities and even delay cognitive decline. These games offer the added benefit of keeping people connected to their culture.**

10 An exploratory study of the effect of mahjong on the cognitive functioning of people with dementia, International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry (2006), [An exploratory study of the effect of mahjong on the cognitive functioning of persons with dementia | Cochrane Library](#)

11 Temporary improvement of cognitive and behavioral scales for Dementia elderly by Shiritori word game with a dialogue robot, Frontiers in Robotics and AI (2022), [Temporary improvement of cognitive and behavioral scales for Dementia elderly by Shiritori word game with a dialogue robot: A pilot study - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

Multilingual and Multicultural Resources on Alzheimer's and Dementia

The Alzheimer Society of Canada maintains a virtual national library that has multilingual resources to support agencies in working with clients who have Alzheimer's. By visiting the link below, you can access a resource titled *What is dementia?*, which describes dementia and its impacts. The resource is available in the following languages:

- Cantonese
- French
- Hindi
- Portuguese
- Punjabi
- Mandarin
- Spanish

The link also features information on how Alzheimer's is viewed in Indigenous communities across Canada.

Link: [National resource library | Alzheimer Society of Canada](#)

In addition to the above resource, the Alzheimer Society of Canada maintains comprehensive Chinese- and Punjabi-language resource hubs, which can be accessed at the links below.

Chinese-language resource hub: [腦退化資源 | Dementia information in Chinese | Alzheimer Society of Canada](#)

Punjabi-language resource hub: [ਡਿਮੈਂਸ਼ੀਆ ਦੀ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਪੰਜਾਬੀ ਡਿੱਚ | Dementia information in Punjabi | Alzheimer Society of Canada](#)

The Alzheimer's Association of the United States has resources available in Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese. Please use the links below to access the resources.

Japanese-language resources: [ホーム | Alzheimer's Association | Japanese](#)

Korean-language resources: [홈 | Alzheimer's Association | Korean](#)

Vietnamese-language resources: [Trang chủ | Alzheimer's Association | Vietnamese](#)

The Dementia Education Program at McGill University offers a resource guide titled *Dementia, Your Companion* that is available in the following languages.

- Arabic
- English
- French
- Greek

To access the guide, please visit the McGill website here: [Dementia, Your Companion Guide | Dementia Education Program - McGill University](#)

