

Coaching Adults with Dementia: Top Tips for Recreational and Community Coaches



The term 'dementia' describes a set of symptoms that include loss of memory, mood changes, and problems with communication and reasoning. There are many types of dementia. The most common are Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. Dementia is progressive, which means symptoms will gradually get worse over time. Adults with dementia are still able to lead a healthy and active lifestyle. However, there may be some considerations coaches want to make when working with adults with dementia. The following top tips provide a starting point if you are a recreational or community coach working with adults who have dementia.

Developing Participant Competence

Be prepared to go over the same instruction every time you coach.

Short-term memory is usually the first to be affected. While short-term memory may not be intact, by getting to know the person, other types of memory can be employed (eg episodic). In order to build on this, it is preferable that the participant sees the same coach every session.

Participants may not be able to learn new skills. This is not a participant or coach failure, but an effect of dementia as an

illness. Try to identify what participants can do and build on these capabilities. Don't worry if your sessions are repetitive week on week.

Create a fun, enjoyable environment – this may help to trigger positive memories stored in the episodic memory and help the memory to 'stick'.

I may not remember my facts, but I can remember my feelings.

Person living with dementia

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Creating Connections and Relationships

Use good communication techniques:

- Speak in a clear voice.
- Speak face-to-face with people.
- Be prepared to explain several times.
- Look for and use clear gestures and facial expressions.
- Use obvious body language.

Be prepared to introduce people each and every week, even to people you have introduced them to before. Find something they each have in common that can be used as a prompt.

Using name badges/stickers can be helpful.

Have continuity of environment and people. Familiarity is key. Set some routines that participants and carers can follow easily.

Find out about communication capability – ask participants and accompanying carers.

Find out about people's life stories – get to know them and find out what they like to talk about. You could possibly link this to the Sporting Memories Network.

Use music that is familiar and liked by participants – ask them what they like.

Developing Confidence

Be aware that dementia affects everyone differently and some days and times of the day are better than others. As a coach, it is important to consider each new coaching session as a new opportunity for success.

Remember that confidence is affected by success, even small successes. Find out what success means for your participants.

Be aware of your participants' confidence levels and how much they are engaging in the activity. Build confidence by making the environment familiar and similar each week. Keep to the same venue or area within a venue.

Have a wide range of activities available that are appropriate in intensity and skill level.

Be mindful of your coaching pace – try not to be too quick.



Provide praise and positive feedback on efforts and achievements. Verbal praise can be forgotten so consider giving each participant a personal recording card where you can note down any progress or achievements. Include some challenges and things to improve on in this short written feedback.

Use the 'sandwich technique' when providing feedback and during the session. Start with a familiar activity to establish confidence, then introduce something new, and finish with something familiar to end the session on a positive note.

Be prepared to have tasks that are repetitive for some participants.

Provide different options and adaptations of the same activity, from easy to more challenging.

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Creating a Caring Environment

Consider each adult with dementia as an individual with individual talents, motivations and needs.

Encourage tolerance and understanding in other participants. The more other participants understand about dementia, the more they can help create a positive coaching environment.

Every person with dementia is different. A few adults with dementia may at times behave in challenging or unpredictable ways. A lack of reasoning capability in some adults with dementia will require you to use distraction techniques or cease the activity, depending on the behaviour exhibited.

Review your support network as a coach and consider whether you require any additional peer support.



A Quick Guide to Memory

Short-term

Lasts up to a few minutes – it is connected to current activity (eg remembering someone's name when you have just been introduced).

Long-term

Memory over minutes, hours, days, weeks and years.

Procedural

This is used when you perform a task automatically without thinking (eg driving, washing up, getting ready in the morning).

Episodic

Remembering specific incidents relating to time and place (eg where you were when your favourite team won the cup).

Semantic

Memory of factual knowledge (eg the name of the prime minister or the capital of France).

Further information about dementia can be found at:

www.ageuk.org.uk

www.alzheimers.org.uk

www.dementiaforward.org.uk

www.dementiauk.org

www.sportingmemoriesnetwork.com

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