

Improving the lives of people with Dementia

Dementia affects an estimated 850,000 people aged 65 and over in the UK and numbers are set to rise as life expectancy growsⁱ. There are also over 40,000 people with 'young dementia' diagnosed before the age of 65ⁱⁱ.

Living with dementia commonly gives rise to feelings of depression anxiety and loss, as people struggle to adjust to changes in their cognition, behaviour and personality. Studies suggest that prevalence of depression for people with vascular dementia may be 30%ⁱⁱⁱ with dementia associated with other conditions increasing risk of depression to over 40%^{iv}

Mental ill health is one of the greatest health challenges of this decade for all age groups, with approximately 25% of older adults affected by depression^v; This figure rises to 40% of people living in care homes. It is estimated that 69% of care home residents have dementia^{vi}.

Stigma and stereotyping of dementia can prevent people from acknowledging symptoms and obtaining the help they need. It can cause individuals and organisations to behave in ways that are unhelpful, emphasising the symptoms of dementia rather than supporting the abilities that people with dementia have.

It is common for people with dementia to experience loss of contact with friends and reduction in social interaction and cessation of social activities they previously enjoyed. This makes the person with dementia at increased risk of loneliness and social isolation. Studies have suggested that loneliness impacts on the mental and physical health of older people.^{vii}

BACP believes that the aim of counselling is to provide opportunity for a person to tell their story, help them to understand themselves better and make positive changes in their life. Therapy should not be denied to an older person because they are living with dementia. Author, counsellor and supervisor Danuta Lipinska who has worked with clients with dementia for many years in the USA and UK explains how the empathy and positive regard at the core of her person-centred therapy work enables clients with dementia to tell their story with 'no pressure on the client to say the right words in the right order or to be smart, logical or even understandable'.^{viii}

Despite limited research into counselling for people with dementia, there is growing evidence of its value in case studies and counselling literature. In her article in *Therapy Today*, counsellor Sarah Baker notes that 'high-quality dementia care empowers, comforts, sustains, validates and confirms the identity of the person with dementia, creating freedom and promoting relationships.'^{ix} She also discussed how counsellors and psychotherapists are able to adapt their skills to meet with the communication and cognitive needs of clients with dementia.^x

Recommendations

Action is required to ensure that access to a choice of talking therapy is made