

Emotional memory stays until the end

In the Dementia Friends program, we learn about the [bookcase analogy](#) that teaches us that our stored memories are like books in a bookcase. That is, our earliest (and most robust) memories are stored on the lower shelf of the bookcase while our new memories are stored on the top shelves.

When dementia strikes and “shakes” the bookshelf, the books on the top shelves fall off first. That means I forgot that I may have eaten breakfast, I don’t remember the name of my new grandchild, and I’m not sure what is happening for the rest of the day. As dementia progresses, more books (memories) fall off the middle shelves, so I need more help to remember how to complete basic tasks and my favorite stories that I love to tell get confused. Sometimes I just fill in the blanks, but I am not lying – I’m just trying to tell my story.

My emotional memories of love, joy, happiness, sadness, frustration and anger largely stay intact on the lower shelf even as dementia progresses. I can sense when others are angry or frustrated with me, so I respond accordingly. Likewise, when people are happy, laughing and talking with me in a friendly voice, I feel happier. These feelings from both positive and negative encounters with people and situations linger for long periods of time but I will forget the context of how or when they occurred. What I am left with is the feeling.

What becomes important for people who are interacting with those living with dementia is understanding that emotions matter most of all. It is essential to respond and acknowledge what the person is feeling. For example, you might say, “I see you are upset,” OR “You look worried” OR “It looks like you are really enjoying that!” Acknowledge both negative and positive emotion.

When negative emotions arise, we want to help the affected person feel better. It’s okay for them to feel bad and even talk about those emotions. But, we don’t want to leave them in a negative place when it becomes more difficult for them to regulate their emotions. In this situation, you can follow these three steps:

- Acknowledge their emotion: “You look like you are angry”
- Apologize for their upset: “I am sorry you are feeling that way,” or “I’d be angry too!”
- Give them something to do: “Could you get the mail from the mailbox?” “I’d love to talk about it – let’s get something to drink,” “I think the Cardinals are on TV right now – let’s go watch the game together!”

Other comforting statements that you can make might include:

- “I’m scared”/ “I will keep you safe
- “Help me”/ “I will help you”
- “I don’t know what to do”/ “You are doing everything right”
- “I am sorry for your upset/loss/feeling”

Emotions and emotional memories do stay strong right until the end of the disease. Your ability to respond in a comforting way will make each day better for the person you love.