



# Using Photos in Person-Centered Dementia Care

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**Families who find they have some extra time around the holidays might enjoy looking into building a special photo album for a family member with dementia. Researchers who've examined the impact of pictures point to the benefits. The activity can help sustain a sense of identity.**

“Autobiographical memory, or memory for personal experiences, is compromised in Alzheimer’s disease, and this compromise has been associated with a diminished sense of one’s self in the disease,” explain [El Haj et al.](#)

They note that the visual information contained in photos can help trigger memory. Photos can provide a “tool for identity formation and communication,” they suggest. They can also help connect the past with now, establishing a stronger sense of identity. Another benefit of photos, according to dementia researchers, is they can heighten positive emotional connections and encourage social interaction.

Some research today focuses on the effectiveness of digital family storybooks and use of other visuals or “signs of the times” from earlier life that encourage reminiscence. For many people with dementia, studies show that looking at photos lifts mood. They can sometimes serve as a quick distractor for an individual in distress, too.

## Choosing photos

[Alzheimer’s Texas](#) says that “even if the person with dementia cannot participate verbally, it can still give them pleasure to be involved in reflections on their past.” Be aware, though, of any uncomfortable memories that might be elicited, they caution.

Generally, a photo collection should emphasize positive, feel-good connections.

They offer tips for choosing photos to use in a photo book:

- Look for photos that reflect what is meaningful to the person with dementia, such as family gatherings or personal hobbies.
- Think about the people whose relationships are important, including key family members, such as a spouse, a child, a grandchild, or close friend. You can create a section for each person.
- “Place photos in chronological order.” From then-til-now creates a coherent flow that makes it easier to process. If you create special sections for key relationships, each section can be in its own chronological order.
- Keep it simple. One or two photos per page is the maximum, to make it easy to focus on the visual information.

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# Using Photos in Person-Centered Dementia Care *continued*

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There may be other memorabilia to include in an album, such as a card or a letter. A simple caption with each entry is useful. Families may choose to enjoy different sections of a photo album at different times; there is no need to power through everything at once.

## Conversation tips

Keeping the goal of connection in mind, it's great to invite and share feelings about a photo.

Experts also suggest avoiding questions such as, "Do you remember this? Or "Who is this?" If a person makes a mistake identifying the who, what, when, or where of a photo, it's fine to let that go. The point of photo-sharing is not to quiz or correct, but simply to make social and emotional connections that strengthen a person's sense of self.

A photo book has the added benefit of helping caregivers get to know the person with dementia. In that sense, it's a powerful tool for advancing person-centered care. Learn more about [person-centered communication](#) in our blog, and Happy Holidays!

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