

A Dementia Friends Awareness Session at Potters Bar URC – 13th May 2026



Julie Churchouse of Alzheimer's UK gave us a fascinating hour of information and insights about dementia in a talk arranged by the Friends of Parkfield PPG.

Julie told us that her mother had had Alzheimer's and also that she'd worked in a care home before joining Alzheimer's UK, so she spoke with that special passion that comes from those intimate experiences.

The distillation of her messages below does not convey the detail or depth of those real-life experiences that she used to illustrate and make real what dementia awareness is about. For that (if you weren't there) you need to watch the session video.

Many people only start learning about dementia when it affects them directly, and by then the learning curve can feel overwhelming. Greater awareness helps everyone—not only individuals and families currently affected, but also friends, neighbours, and the wider community.

Key message 1: Dementia is not a natural part of

ageing - Dementia is not an inevitable part of getting older. Age can increase the risk, but growing older does not automatically mean someone will develop dementia.

Many people also remain undiagnosed, which can leave them without support. Dementia does not only affect older people: there are also

many people under 65 living with a diagnosis. For younger people in particular, getting a diagnosis can take time because symptoms may initially be mistaken for stress, menopause, or other conditions. That is why early advice and assessment are so important.

Key message 2: Dementia is caused by diseases of the brain - A helpful way to picture dementia is to imagine the brain as a set of fairy lights. In a healthy brain, the connections are working well. With dementia, some of those connections begin to flicker, weaken, and eventually fail. That is why abilities can vary from day to day and why dementia progresses over time.

There are ways to support brain health, including:

- staying hydrated;
- keeping mentally active;
- staying socially engaged;
- challenging the brain with new activities, such as using your non-dominant hand, learning some words in another language, or trying a musical instrument;
- looking after physical health, especially heart and circulation health.

Medication may help with some types of dementia by supporting brain function for a time, but dementia is progressive and cannot currently be reversed.

Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia - Dementia is an umbrella term for a range of brain diseases. Alzheimer's disease is the most common type, but there are many others. The main types commonly discussed are:

- **Alzheimer's disease** – often affects short-term memory and language first, with gradual progression.
- **Vascular dementia** – linked to blood supply problems in the brain and may progress in steps rather than gradually.
- **Dementia with Lewy bodies** – can involve movement changes, vivid hallucinations, and Parkinson's-like symptoms.
- **Frontotemporal dementia** – often affects behaviour, personality, and social filters, and is more likely to occur at a younger age.

Symptoms vary greatly, which is why diagnosis and support need to be person-centred.

Key message 3: Dementia is not just about losing your memory - It can also affect language, vision, hearing, sequencing, attention, movement, judgement, and behaviour. Not every person will experience all of these changes, and not to the same degree, but understanding the possible effects helps us provide better support.

Simple adjustments can make a big difference. For example:

- using prompts or reminders for daily routines;
- reducing visual clutter and strong patterns;
- using coloured plates or contrasting toilet seats to make important items easier to see;
- checking that glasses and hearing aids are clean, working, and being used;
- breaking tasks down into smaller, manageable steps.

Communication and support

People living with dementia can still communicate, but they may need more time and support. It helps to listen carefully, reduce distractions, speak clearly, use familiar words, and pay attention to body language and tone.

It is also important to involve the person in decisions wherever possible. Even when someone cannot manage a full task independently, they may still be able to take part in part of it.

The bookcase idea: memory and emotion

One way to think about memory in dementia is as a bookcase. Recent memories sit on the top shelves and older memories lower down. As dementia progresses, the top shelves are often affected first, which means recent events are harder to retain while older memories may remain more accessible and can remain fresh and real.

However, even when factual memory fades, emotional memory often remains. Someone may not remember what you did together yesterday, but they may still hold on to the feeling your visit created. That is why kindness, reassurance, and emotional connection matter so much.



Why breaking tasks down matters

A simple task such as making a cup of tea actually involves many separate steps: deciding to make it, finding the kettle, filling it, choosing the right tap, locating the cup, tea bags, milk, spoon, and so on. For someone living with dementia, that sequence can become very difficult.

Rather than taking over completely, it can help to break the task down and support only the parts the person finds hard. For example, you might place the cup, tea bag, and spoon where they can be seen, then make the drink alongside them so they can copy the steps. Supporting someone to do part of a task can help preserve independence, confidence, and routine.

Key message 4: There is more to the person than the dementia - Behaviour always has meaning. If someone seems distressed, restless, or withdrawn, there may be a reason: pain, fear, confusion, boredom, habit, or an unmet need. Looking beyond the label of dementia helps us respond more compassionately and effectively.

Meaningful activity can make a big difference. For example, someone who used to have a regular job or routine may still feel a need for purpose and structure. Helping them continue familiar activities in an adapted way can reduce distress and improve wellbeing.

Key message 5: A little understanding makes a big difference - When someone is diagnosed with dementia, their world can shrink very quickly. Friends and family may not know what to say or do, and people can become isolated. Small acts of understanding matter: staying in touch, dropping in for a short visit, offering a bit of company, or giving a carer a few minutes' respite can all make a real difference.

Support available

The Alzheimer's Society offers information and support, including access to trained dementia advisers. In Hertfordshire, support is also available through Memory Support Hertfordshire, a partnership that includes the Alzheimer's Society, Age UK, Carers in Hertfordshire, and Admiral Nurses. Together, these services can help with practical advice, benefits, planning, carer support, and more specialist family support when needed.



Telephone: 0300 131 3946
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Website: www.memorysupportherts.org.uk