



## 5 Benefits of Spiritual Care for Elders with Dementia

Elisa Bosley, Chaplain

elisa@spiritualeldercare.com

Why is spiritual care so important for people with dementia? Aren't people with dementia "too far gone" to be able to benefit from faith-based activities and rituals?

Every day, I see God's Spirit reach beyond mental capacity to bless elders—and myself. It's a grave mistake to assume that dementia prevents or destroys belief and the desire for spiritual connection. With empathy, faith, and a few tools, you can be the vehicle by which God reaches the souls of elders with dementia.

Here are five consistent ways that people with Alzheimer's and other dementias benefit from spiritual care provided in their long-term residence.

**PEACE.** For people with dementia, the world can seem confusing and chaotic. "Who are all these people? Where are my parents? Why won't anyone take me home?"

Spiritual care offers seniors the assurance that they are not alone—that God is with them, always and without fail. God has not forgotten them, and God desires continued relationship with them.

When you share promises of God's uninterrupted presence and love from scripture, song, and experience, the truth goes into a deep place in the soul. Whether the knowledge lasts for a minute or an hour doesn't matter; the peace itself often lingers. Elders with dementia take comfort from their religious beliefs and truths, even if they can't verbalize what they're feeling.

### What you can do to bring Peace:

- Read scriptures together (slowly). Good options to communicate peace include Psalms 16, 23, 27; Philippians 4:4-7; and John 14:25-27.
- Sing hymns of God's presence: Great is Thy Faithfulness, Jesus Loves Me, His Eye is on the Sparrow, Abide with Me, Nearer My God to Thee, Blessed Assurance, What a Friend We Have in Jesus, In the Garden
- Watch an elder's face or body language for reactions, and respond accordingly with gentle touch, a hug, or softly squeezing their hand.

**SENSE OF PURPOSE.** If a person is still here on this Earth, God has a purpose for their life. Having dementia doesn't mean a person is "done" or "gone." Spiritual care honors each person's life as it is right now, based on his or her inherent and eternal value, not what a person can or cannot do.

Interactive Bible studies, worship services, and hymn singing in their place of residence give elders with dementia the chance to *actively contribute* to a social, group dynamic. And they do! Often, the comments that come out of their mouths astonish me. Elders' purpose during these times is not a fiction. They have wisdom to offer.

They also offer tangible care. Elders often help each other (and me) during spiritual activities—picking up a dropped hymnal for their neighbor, helping someone find the current page, distributing or collecting songbooks. I ask for volunteers to read passages aloud. If someone enjoys praying aloud, I encourage it. People care for each other as God is caring for them.

Interactive spiritual care highlights an elder's remaining strengths and abilities rather than any weaknesses. And every act, comment, or even facial expression is part of their purpose in that moment.

**DIGNITY.** Providing interactive spiritual care to people with dementia confers the respect and dignity they have earned as elders—and they know it and appreciate it. More than once, elders have told me, "I love this [interactive] format; you don't just read to us. I love that we all talk together. You don't talk to us like we're children."

Failure to provide meaningful spiritual activities does a great

**What you can do to foster a Sense of Purpose:**

- Encourage elders to read a short passage aloud to the group. (Make sure it's printed with very large type.)
- Ask elders to help you set up the service and its elements: pass around songbooks, arrange the table, welcome gathering congregants. Don't worry if they don't "get it right"—you can subtly adjust things later if needed.
- During worship services, occasionally ask for song requests and then play and sing the choice immediately.

**What you can do to convey Dignity:**

- Talk to elders slowly and clearly, but don't condescend; don't speak to them as if they are children.
- Use words they recognize, like the Lord's Prayer (Our Father) and Psalm 23 (The Lord is my shepherd), and encourage them to join in.
- Make eye contact. Use their names to praise any participation. ("I love that insight, Marge!")

disservice to people who grew up going to church, leading as elders and deacons, teaching Sunday school, singing in choirs, and especially identifying as a contributing church member. Spiritual care honors this part of their history, rather than dismissing it or assuming it's "gone," and values seniors as active, alive people.

That's one reason hymns and spiritual songs are so powerful. Recent research<sup>1</sup> shows that the brain center responsible for music memory remains largely untouched by Alzheimer's disease. Faith music in particular—classic hymns, gospel songs, and traditional spirituals—evokes powerful, joyful memories for seniors who spent years going to church. I've lost count of the times that nonverbal, largely unresponsive elders with dementia have started singing or mouthing along to hymns when the music starts.

**HOPE.** In the moment—and especially with dementia, this moment is the only thing that matters—spiritual care offers a glimpse beyond the distressing realities of daily life.

Elders' bodies may be riddled with aches and pains; the care staff and schedules keep them moving through events that don't make sense or may be uncomfortable. So much hurts, and so many things are lost or gone. But God is alive, constant, and good. God is with them, blessing, healing, providing, and comforting.

Prayers, scripture, worship music, communion—all of it provides recognizable paths for elders (and caregivers!) to receive blessing and hope from God in their difficult journey. Providing spiritual care helps seniors to take comfort, *even if just for a moment*, that there is a bigger picture than what they can see. Like the rest of us, elders with dementia want to be reminded of God's goodness, love, forgiveness, and presence. After a recent worship service, one new resident told me through tears, "I have missed going to church *so much*."

**What you can do to encourage Hope:**

- Pray with them. If someone has a specific need (even if they can't verbalize it), whether it's physical or emotional, ask if you can pray for them right then and there. Keep it short – maybe 30 seconds. Put your arm on or around their shoulder and pray fairly loudly. Bless them specifically and genuinely with God's comfort and presence.

**QUALITY OF LIFE.** Nearly any kind of participatory activity—bingo, art, trivia games—yields benefits, such as general happiness, calm, and well-being, for those with

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobson, et al. "Why musical memory can be preserved in advanced Alzheimer's disease." *Brain*, 2015: 138; 2438-2450.

Alzheimer's and dementia. But research<sup>2</sup> indicates that religious involvement in particular correlates to better physical health and well-being in older adults—including better treatment compliance.

Spiritual care offers unique benefits because it draws on deep memory and a deep truth: that the souls of those with dementia are alive and still earnestly yearn for regular, meaningful connection with others and with the Spirit of God.

Thanks be to God, cognition is not a requirement for expressing faith and receiving God's love. "A person with dementia has a whole and well spirit and, in the broadest sense, their brain is a vehicle of self-expression; it does not define their essence," says Megan Carnarius, author of *A Deeper Perspective on Alzheimer's and Other Dementias: Practical Tools with Spiritual Insights*.

**What you can do to improve Quality of Life:**

- Host a small group Bible study in a senior care residence. Get how-to instructions and download free, pre-written studies at <https://spiritualeldercare.com/church-services/bible-studies/>
- Provide a weekly, nondenominational church service. It doesn't have to be Sunday morning; any day will work. You'll find all the written and musical materials you need at [spiritualeldercare.com](https://spiritualeldercare.com).

Just like those of us who remain "sound minded," God is faithful to meet elders exactly where they're at. Deep calls to deep (Psalm 42) as the Spirit communes with seniors' souls in ways we cannot see or even imagine, ministering to their hearts and minds in ways both personal and profound.

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<sup>2</sup> Peteet, et al. "Integrating spirituality into the care of older adults." *International Psychogeriatrics*, 2019: 31(1): 31-38.

Beuscher, et al. "Using spirituality to cope with early-stage Alzheimer's disease." *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 2009: 31(5): 583-98.