



5 Benefits of Spiritual Care for Elders with Dementia

Elisa Bosley, Chaplain | elisa@spiritualeldercare.com

It's a grave mistake to assume that dementia prevents or destroys belief and the desire for spiritual connection. Deep calls to deep (Psalm 42) as God's Spirit communes with seniors' souls. Here are five consistent ways that people with Alzheimer's and other dementias benefit from spiritual care provided in their long-term residence.

PEACE. When you share God's promises of uninterrupted presence and love from scripture, song, and experience, the truth goes into a deep place in the soul. Though the knowledge may not last, the peace itself often lingers. Elders with dementia take comfort from their religious beliefs and truths, even if they can't verbalize their feelings.

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

SENSE OF PURPOSE. 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. This kind 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.

What you can do to foster a Sense of Purpose:

- When having a Bible study, 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 worship 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.

DIGNITY. Failure to provide meaningful spiritual activities does a great 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 members. Providing interactive spiritual care honors this part of their history rather than dismissing it or assuming it's "gone." It respects seniors as active, alive people.

What you can do to convey Dignity:

- Talk to elders slowly and clearly. Speak to them as adults, not as 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!")

HOPE. Spiritual care offers a glimpse beyond the distressing realities of daily life. Prayers, scripture, sacred 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.

What you can do to encourage Hope:

- Pray with them. If someone has a specific need (even if they can't verbalize it), ask if you can pray for them right then and there. Keep it short – maybe 30 seconds. Hold their hand and pray fairly loudly. Bless them specifically and genuinely with God's comfort and presence.

QUALITY OF LIFE. Nearly any kind of participatory activity yields general happiness, calm, and well-being for those with Alzheimer's and dementia. But research¹ indicates that religious involvement in particular correlates to better quality of life in older adults—including better treatment compliance.

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, including best practices and tips, at spiritualeldercare.com.

¹ 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.