

EVERYDAY DIGNITY

6 SIMPLE APPROACHES FOR DEMENTIA CARE PARTNERS



WHY IS PRESERVING DIGNITY SO IMPORTANT?

As a care partner, you already juggle so much—managing daily routines, responding to changes, and trying to create moments of calm in the midst of it all. With so many pressing needs, it's natural to focus on safety, comfort, and meeting immediate challenges first. But one aspect of care that can easily be overlooked—and yet makes a significant difference—is preserving dignity.

Dementia may change how your partner remembers, communicates, or completes tasks, but it does not take away their need to feel respected, valued, and included. When dignity is preserved, your partner is more likely to feel secure, less frustrated, and more connected to who they are. And for you as a care partner, it can strengthen trust, ease interactions, and bring more peace into daily care.

This guide is designed to give you 6 practical, realistic ways to protect and nurture your partner's dignity—so you can approach care with confidence while honoring who they are at every stage.

APPROACH #1

COMMUNICATION WITH RESPECT

TIPS

- Speak directly to your partner, not about them as if they aren't there.
- Use their preferred name or title.
- Simplify language without sounding childish—short sentences, clear choices.
- Offer time to respond—don't rush or fill in words unless asked.
- Validate feelings, even if the facts differ from their reality.
- Use tone and body language that match your words and intention—gentle, calm, and reassuring.
- Approach from the front and make eye contact to reduce surprise and foster connection.
- Use appropriate visual aids, gestures, pointing, or demonstrations to help clarify meaning when words alone aren't enough.
- Acknowledge attempts to communicate, even if the words aren't clear—reflect back what you understood.
- Avoid talking over or correcting unnecessarily—focus on support, not perfection.

EXAMPLE

Maria's husband often repeats questions about when dinner will be ready. Instead of correcting him with, "I already told you," she responds each time with a calm, "Dinner will be at six, John." She looks him in the eye, says his name, and gives him time to process her words. To give him extra reassurance, she also writes Dinner – 6:00pm on a small whiteboard by the clock and gently points to it when he asks again. He relaxes because he feels heard, not dismissed, and has a visual reminder to turn to.

APPROACH #2

CHOICE & CONTROL

TIPS

- Present limited but meaningful options (e.g., “Would you like tea or water?”).
- Show choices as real items or pictures when possible, to make decision-making clearer and easier.
- Encourage participation in decision-making for daily routines.
- Default to known favorites when choices are difficult, framing it as their preference remembered (e.g., “You usually enjoy chamomile tea, would you like that today?”).
- Frame requests positively (“Let’s go for a walk!” vs. “You need exercise.”).
- Avoid forcing—instead, invite with gentle cues and honor refusals gracefully. A “no” is still a valid choice, and you can always try again later.

EXAMPLE

When helping his mother get dressed, Kevin doesn’t open the whole closet. He thoughtfully selects two shirts and holds them up—her favorite blue one and a soft patterned one—and says, “Would you like the blue shirt or the one with flowers?” His mom smiles, points to the blue one, and feels she had a say in what she wears.

APPROACH #3

ENVIRONMENT THAT SUPPORTS INDEPENDENCE

TIPS

- Keep essential items visible and within easy reach.
- Label drawers, doors, or spaces with words and pictures to reduce confusion.
- Provide adaptive tools as necessary (e.g., easy-grip utensils, clothing with Velcro/elastic).
- Simplify surroundings—declutter but keep familiar, comforting items.
- Arrange spaces to support safe movement and reduce fall risks.
- Use contrast (e.g., dark placemat under a light plate, red toilet seat for a white toilet) to make important items or boundaries stand out.
- Optimize lighting, while reducing shadows and glare.

EXAMPLE

Sandra noticed her father often seemed confused about where the bathroom was, especially at night—sometimes leading to accidents and frustration in the morning. To support him, she placed a sign with the word “Bathroom” and a simple picture on the door, choosing colors that contrast with the door to make it easier to see. She also added a nightlight to guide the way and began leaving the bathroom light on with the door slightly cracked. Now, he can find it himself more easily, which reduces stress for both of them and restores a sense of independence.

APPROACH #4

PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT & PURPOSE

TIPS

- Meet your partner where they are—adjust activities to their current abilities and mood, not what they “used to” do.
- Break tasks into smaller steps—demonstrating when needed, so your partner can participate without feeling overwhelmed.
- Offer time, not pressure—give space for responses instead of rushing; silence can be supportive.
- Offer error-free activities where success is built in (e.g, folding towels, watering plants).
- Invite your partner to help with tasks they’ve done in the past and found meaningful (e.g., wiping counters, setting the table, arranging flowers).
- Leave accessible, pre-setup activities out—give your partner an easy way to discover and engage in tasks they may enjoy independently.
- Provide sensory-rich experiences—music, textures, scents that are familiar.
- Rotate activities to prevent boredom but keep routines consistent.

EXAMPLE

David’s wife used to love cooking but can no longer manage a full meal. Rather than removing her from the kitchen, he gives her safe tasks like rinsing vegetables or stirring a bowl. She feels useful and connected to something she’s always loved, even if the roles have shifted.

APPROACH #5

ENCOURAGING AUTONOMY IN DAILY LIVING

TIPS

- Allow them to start tasks on their own, if able—step in only as needed for support (e.g., demonstration, hand-over-hand guidance).
- Focus on effort, not perfection—let them complete tasks even if results aren't flawless.
- Demonstrate rather than take over—show how to do a step first instead of doing it for them.
- Break instructions into single, manageable steps to make tasks easier to follow.
- Respect privacy during personal care and explain each step before assisting or touching them.

EXAMPLE

While brushing teeth, Rachel places the toothbrush in her husband's hand and gently demonstrates by brushing her own teeth. He imitates her movements and does most of it himself. She only steps in when needed, which helps keep his confidence intact.

APPROACH #6

ATTITUDE & APPROACH**TIPS**

- Enter interactions with patience and calmness—your energy sets the tone.
- Treat adult partners as adults, always.
- Focus on strengths, not losses—notice what they can do and build off it.
- Use humor and lightness appropriately—never at their expense.
- Respond to mistakes with empathy, not correction—acknowledge accidents as normal and maintain their dignity.
- Reinforce positive feelings—praise effort, small successes, or cooperative moments to build confidence, without being condescending or patronizing.
- End interactions with reassurance—a genuine smile, a thank you, a touch if welcome.

EXAMPLE

During breakfast, Emily's father spills a little coffee while reaching across the table. Instead of reacting with frustration, she calmly grabs a napkin, says, "Oops, it's okay. Spills happen!" and helps him clean up. She then asks, "Would you like a little more coffee?" and pours it if he says yes. She smiles and continues the conversation, keeping the mood light. He finishes his meal without embarrassment, and the moment doesn't derail the morning.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

EXAMPLES

EXAMPLE #1

On Sunday morning, Elaine helps her mother get ready for church. She greets her warmly by name, holds up two dresses, and asks, “Would you like the green dress or the purple one today?” (**Communication & Choice**). Elaine lays the outfit on the bed where it’s easy to see and reach (**Environment**). After helping with the dress, she encourages her mom to brush her own hair, stepping in only to finish the back (**Autonomy**). Gospel music plays softly in the background while they get ready (**Engagement**). Elaine stays calm and encouraging throughout, complimenting her mom on how nice she looks (**Attitude**). By the time they leave, her mother is smiling, not because everything was perfect, but because she felt respected and involved.

EXAMPLE #2

At lunchtime, Robert greets his father and asks, “Would you like soup or a sandwich today?” (**Communication & Choice**). He sets the table with simple place settings, keeping everything his father needs in sight—bowl, saucer, spoon, butter knife, napkin—placed on a contrasting placemat so the items are easier to see (**Environment**). His dad stirs his own soup and butters part of his bread while Robert prepares the rest (**Autonomy**). Robert maintains a relaxed tone, even when spills happen, and thanks his dad for eating lunch with him (**Attitude**). The meal feels shared, not managed.

EXAMPLE #3

Before heading outside for a walk, Janelle asks her husband, “Would you like to wear your baseball cap or your sun hat?” (**Communication & Choice**). She gives him his walking shoes and has placed a labeled basket by the door with his keys and sunglasses, using bright colors and pointing them out so he can find them easily. (**Environment**). He slips on his shoes while she ties the laces (**Autonomy**). Along the way, she points out blooming flowers and lets him pause to touch the leaves (**Engagement**). She keeps the pace easy, laughs at his jokes, and reassures him with a smile and nod when he hesitates at a curb (**Attitude**). By the time they return home, he feels accomplished and included.

EXAMPLE #4

During a quiet afternoon, Sarah notices her mother has had a small accident in her pants, but her mother insists she’s fine. Sarah calmly says, “Let’s get you into some fresh pants so you stay comfortable,” keeping her tone neutral and supportive (**Attitude**). She keeps a container of clean pants, wipes, incontinence supplies, and a towel within easy reach and clearly labeled (**Environment**). Sarah invites her mother to help as much as she can—handing over items or supporting her balance while she steps into the fresh pants—assisting only where needed (**Autonomy**). By responding matter-of-factly and without argument, Sarah preserves her mother’s dignity and keeps the moment calm and stress-free.

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**DO YOUR BEST.
THEN REPEAT.**

THE END

MAY YOU EMBRACE THE JOURNEY AHEAD OF YOU.

For More Dementia Tips:

