

# LONG TERM CARE COMMUNITY COALITION

*Advancing Quality, Dignity & Justice*

## NON-PHARMACOLOGIC APPROACHES TO DEMENTIA CARE

### FACT SHEET FOR INDIVIDUALS LIVING AT HOME OR IN ASSISTED LIVING

Supporting a person living with dementia means more than addressing symptoms – it means understanding the individual behind the condition. While changes in behavior, mood, and cognition are common, they are often responses to unmet needs or environmental challenges, not signs of a psychiatric disorder that require medication.

**Non-pharmacologic approaches** prioritize dignity, safety, and personhood. These strategies focus on adapting the environment, improving communication, and providing meaningful engagement to prevent or reduce distress. Evidence shows that such approaches are often more effective – and far safer – than psychotropic medications, especially antipsychotics, which carry serious risks for older adults.

This fact sheet outlines practical, compassionate strategies that can be used to support individuals living with dementia through person-centered care that respects their needs, abilities, and preferences. For more information and resources, please visit <https://nursinghome411.org/dementia-care-in-the-community>.

### The Value of Non-Pharmacologic Approaches in Dementia Care

People living with dementia may experience behavioral symptoms (e.g., agitation, aggression, vocalizations) and psychological symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression, hallucinations, delusions). These may stem from physical discomfort (such as pain or infection) or emotional distress (such as boredom, fear, or changes in routine). Except in emergencies, the standard of care is to address these needs without medication whenever possible.

### Professional Standards of Dementia Care

Professional standards prioritize non-pharmacologic strategies as a first-line approach in dementia care. These methods help maintain cognitive function, support emotional well-being, promote independence in daily activities, and reduce so-called “behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia” (BPSD).

**These approaches are especially helpful for individuals in assisted living or at home.** For family caregivers, they provide practical, low-risk, evidence-based tools that can reduce reliance on medication and improve outcomes. By prioritizing these approaches, care providers can enhance quality of life, support cognitive functioning, and mitigate BPSD, all while minimizing the potential adverse effects associated with medication use.

### Common Non-Pharmacologic Approaches:

**Note:** Non-pharmacologic interventions such as cognitive stimulation, reminiscence therapy, and music therapy have been shown to improve quality of life and, in some cases, cognitive function. Effectiveness can vary based on the individual and their care setting.

Non-pharmacologic care – like all care – works best when it is tailored to the individual’s unique history, preferences, and strengths.

**Psychological and Behavioral Therapies:**

- ⇒ **Cognitive Stimulation Therapy:** Group-based sessions involving puzzles, games, and mentally engaging activities.
- ⇒ **Reminiscence Therapy:** Uses photographs, music, or videos to evoke positive memories and encourage engagement. This can be used in a group or individual setting.
- ⇒ **Validation Therapy:** Emphasizes empathetic communication and emotional validation through active listening and gentle cues.
- ⇒ **Pet Therapy:** Interaction with animals for comfort and emotional connection.
- ⇒ **Bright Light Therapy:** Exposure to natural light to support sleep and regulate circadian rhythms.

**Social and Sensory Interventions:**

- ⇒ **Aromatherapy:** Use of essential oils to promote calm and stimulate the nervous system.
- ⇒ **Massage Therapy:** Gentle physical touch to reduce anxiety and foster emotional connection.
- ⇒ **Music Therapy:** Involves listening to familiar, personalized music to stimulate memory and reduce stress.

**Physical and Functional Activities:**

- ⇒ **Occupational Therapy (OT):** Provided by trained professionals, OT supports participation in daily activities and adapts environments to reduce stressors and enhance safety.
- ⇒ **Walking:** Gentle, regular walks—indoors or outdoors—can improve mobility, reduce agitation, and provide sensory stimulation.
- ⇒ **Household Tasks:** Activities like folding laundry or watering plants promote physical engagement and a sense of purpose.

**Tips for Non-Pharmacologic Care**

- Learn what brings comfort or joy to the individual, such as music, a tv show, scents, pets, or favorite memories.
- Introduce one approach at a time and see how your loved one responds.
- Keep a journal to track which activities improve mood or behavior.
- Be patient and flexible; some approaches may take time or need adjustments.
- Involve the individual in activities they enjoy or have a history with—even small successes can make a big difference.
- **Get support!** Don’t hesitate to ask a dementia care specialist, occupational therapy, or social worker for help customizing approaches.