

What is your most significant memory of sharing a meal with family, friends, or others? What was the occasion? What was on the menu? Were you at home, in a restaurant, or somewhere else? It is likely that you have a strong memory for particular events because the social interactions, culinary sensations, and atmosphere struck you at an emotional level.

Sharing a meal, in most cultures, is important, not only for nourishment, but also for social engagement and celebration. When a person living with dementia (PLwD) experiences brain changes that affect their participation in this important daily activity, adaptations can be considered to promote a meaningful experience that satisfies physical and emotional needs.

In the middle stage of the disease, you may notice that a PLwD appears disinterested in a delicious meal placed in front of them. They may reach across the table to investigate a centerpiece or even the food from another person's plate. According to Teepa's GEMS<sup>®</sup> model, we call this the "Amber" GEMS state. Like a dragonfly caught in amber, the PLwD lives in a moment of time and is very focused on sensory input, both what is liked and what is not liked.

Understanding the following brain changes in the Amber GEMS state can help care partners create a mealtime experience that is pleasant, engaging, and satisfies the nutritional needs of a PLwD.

**Vision** - In mid-stage dementia, the visual field narrows substantially to binocular vision. To experience this for yourself, try using two hands to create binoculars over both eyes. Loss of object recognition is also prevalent. That is, a PLwD may not recognize the specific use or function of a particular object such as a fork, knife, or cup and may busily "experiment" with their use. The narrow visual field will impact a person's ability to see a plate of food that has been placed directly in front of them on a table, just below their functional visual field. The PLwD will be able to focus on one activity at a time: eating (task vision) or connecting with you (social vision). To accommodate vision changes in the Amber GEMS state, consider the following:

- White linens and centerpieces are lovely touches for an elegant meal. However, for a PLwD, distinguishing between a white tablecloth, white dinnerware, and a white napkin can be difficult. Keep place settings simple, including plates and bowls that are a contrasting color to the food.
- Serve the meal by delivering the plate directly within the person's visual field, ensuring they have a visual regard for the plate and the cup.

- Support object confusion through substitution, not subtraction. If a PLwD is observed to use a knife, fork, or spoon incorrectly, resist the urge to correct. Rather, demonstrate correct use, and substitute the incorrect utensil with the correct one.

**Language** - Understanding and expressing needs through verbal communication becomes increasingly challenging. When being spoken to, a PLwD in the Amber GEMS state will frequently miss one in two words. This may result in a person agreeing to a meal choice without having understood the options being presented. To support language changes, keep the following in mind:

- Limit words and substitute visual gestures and pictures to indicate meal choices and preferences for food or beverage.
- Provide short, step-by-step instructions. For example, “Pick up your spoon. Scoop the soup. Lift the fork to your mouth.” Reinforce verbal instructions with corresponding gestures.
- Promote task engagement over social engagement to support the PLwD in completing the meal and obtaining the full nutritional benefits.

**Sensorimotor** - Eating is a complex task which requires various parts of the brain to work together from the recognition of hunger to the visual recognition of the food, and from the motor coordination to manipulate eating utensils to the chewing of food and safely swallowing it. To maintain safety while assisting a PLwD to eat, consider the following:

- If required, assist with eating using the Hand-under-Hand® (HuH) skill to initiate and transfer the utensil to the PLwD to complete the meal independently if able.
- Consider the person's hand dominance, as they will maintain motor memory for performing a task such as using a utensil to bring food to their mouth, using the hand they have used their entire life. Position cups and utensils to promote dominant hand use.
- Go slow. Allow time for adequate chewing and swallowing. Notice when the person has swallowed their food before offering another bite or drink.
- Consider large-handled utensils which can help facilitate optimal grip and reduce tremors.

With the right tools and the right support, people living with dementia in the Amber GEMS state can continue to experience mealtimes as both social and meaningful activities.

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