



10 Ways to Calm Anxiety Without an Argument

Gentle, practical ways to help someone feel calmer

♥ **Nicole** dementiaonline.org

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Anxiety is one of the most common challenges experienced by people living with dementia. It may appear as repeated questions, pacing, restlessness, irritability, or an urgent need to leave the house. These behaviours can be distressing for the person and exhausting for those who care for them.

When someone is anxious, our instinct is often to explain, correct or reassure them with facts. Unfortunately, dementia can make it difficult for the brain to process logical explanations, and arguments or repeated corrections often increase fear rather than reduce it.

The good news is that there are gentle, practical ways to help someone feel calmer while protecting their dignity.

1. Stay Calm Yourself

People living with dementia are often very sensitive to the emotions of those around them.

If you speak quickly, sound frustrated or appear anxious yourself, they may become even more unsettled.

Take a slow breath before responding. Speak gently, smile if appropriate and keep your voice calm.

Sometimes your calmness is more reassuring than your words.

2. Don't Argue About the Facts

If someone insists they need to go to work — even though they retired years ago — or asks for a parent who died long ago, it can be tempting to correct them.

While the facts may be accurate, they rarely ease anxiety.

Instead of saying:

“You’ve been retired for twenty years.”

Try:

“You always worked hard. Tell me about your job.”

“You sound worried. Let’s sit down together for a cup of tea.”

Distraction and redirecting are your best friends! Responding to the feeling behind the words is often more helpful than correcting the details.

3. Listen for the Emotion

An anxious statement is often a clue that something deeper is going on.

“I want to go home” may mean:

- bullet "I don't feel safe."
- bullet "I'm confused."
- bullet "I'm tired."
- bullet "I miss my family."
- bullet "I need reassurance."

Instead of focusing on the exact words, ask yourself: **"What might they be feeling right now?"**
Meeting the emotional need is often more effective than answering the literal question.

4. Reduce Noise and Distractions

Busy environments can become overwhelming for someone living with dementia.

Television, multiple conversations, loud appliances and clutter can all add to feelings of confusion.

If anxiety is building, try creating a calmer environment by:

- bullet Turning the television down or off.
- bullet Closing unnecessary doors.
- bullet Moving to a quieter room.
- bullet Softening harsh lighting.
- bullet Playing gentle music they enjoy.

Sometimes less stimulation leads to greater calm.

5. Offer a Simple Choice

Too many options can feel overwhelming.

Instead of asking: *"What would you like to do?"* — try offering one or two simple choices.

"Would you like a cup of tea or a glass of water?"

"Would you like to sit in the garden or by the window?"

Small choices help someone maintain a sense of independence without creating unnecessary stress. If this is still too much, offer one choice — or simply take a drink over and leave it beside them.

6. Use Familiar Activities

Anxiety often eases when attention shifts to something comforting and familiar. Ideas include:

- bullet Looking through family photographs.
- bullet Listening to favourite music.
- bullet Folding towels together.
- bullet Watering plants.
- bullet Watching birds outside.

bullet Completing a simple puzzle.

bullet Holding a familiar object such as a favourite blanket or cushion.

Gently guiding attention toward something enjoyable may help.

7. Check for Physical Needs

Sometimes anxiety has a simple physical cause. Ask yourself whether the person might be:

bullet Hungry.

bullet Thirsty.

bullet In pain.

bullet Too hot or too cold.

bullet Needing the toilet.

bullet Constipated.

bullet Tired.

bullet Uncomfortable because of clothing or footwear.

Addressing these needs may resolve the anxiety without further intervention.

8. Use Reassuring Body Language

Communication isn't only about words.

bullet A warm smile.

bullet Gentle eye contact.

bullet Sitting beside someone instead of standing over them.

bullet Offering a hand to hold, if they are comfortable with it.

These small gestures can help someone feel safe and supported, even when words are difficult to understand.

9. Keep a Predictable Routine

Many people living with dementia feel more secure when the day follows a familiar pattern. Try to keep regular times for:

bullet Waking up.

bullet Meals.

bullet Medication.

bullet Walks.

bullet Activities.

bullet Rest.

bullet Bedtime.

A consistent routine reduces the number of unexpected situations that can trigger anxiety.

10. Remember That Connection Matters More Than Correction

As dementia progresses, there may be many moments when you know the facts but your loved one experiences the world differently.

It can be tempting to correct every misunderstanding. Instead, ask yourself: **“Will correcting this make them feel better?”**

If the answer is no, it may be kinder to focus on reassurance, companionship and comfort.

Sharing a favourite song, enjoying a photo album together or simply sitting quietly can strengthen your connection far more than proving a point.

When Anxiety Suddenly Gets Worse

If someone who is usually calm becomes suddenly anxious, agitated or confused, it's important to consider whether something else might be causing the change.

Sudden increases in anxiety can sometimes be linked to:

- bullet Infections, such as urinary tract infections.

- bullet Dehydration.

- bullet Pain.

- bullet Medication side effects.

- bullet Constipation.

- bullet Poor sleep.

- bullet Changes in the environment.

If the change is sudden, severe or accompanied by other concerning symptoms, seek advice from a healthcare professional.

Looking After Yourself

Supporting someone with dementia can be emotionally demanding. There will be days when nothing seems to work — and that's okay. You don't have to be perfect.

Celebrate the small victories — a shared smile, a calm conversation, a peaceful cup of tea or a few quiet minutes together. Those moments matter.

Remember to seek support for yourself too. Family members, friends, support groups and respite services can make a real difference. It is so important to **‘care for the carer’**. Make sure you have breaks from carer responsibilities. If you are stressed, down or tired it will be too hard to care for another with patience, and their behaviour is likely to reflect yours.

Look after yourself.

Final Thoughts

When someone living with dementia becomes anxious, they're not trying to be difficult. They're responding to a world that may feel increasingly confusing and unpredictable.

By staying calm, responding to emotions instead of arguing about facts, and creating a reassuring environment, you can help reduce anxiety while preserving the person's dignity and sense of security.

You may not always be able to change what they remember, but you can influence how they feel. And often, feeling safe, understood and loved is the greatest comfort of all.

Speak to your doctor if you have concerns — sometimes medication may be prescribed to reduce anxiety. Listening to relaxing background music, relaxation sounds, or specific calming frequencies (searchable online) may benefit the household.

A Note on Calming Scents

Consider some relaxing scents. Only use real essential oils in oil burners, candles or diffusers — fake fragrances can make health worse. Research that the oils are safe before choosing them, and don't apply them to skin unless you research them further.

There are reports of **lemon balm** reducing agitation, and a daily ritual of **rosemary and lemon** in the mornings, then **lavender and orange** oils in the evening, benefitting people with dementia. Explore these options and see what feels right for your loved one.