11 Tips for Bathing a Person with Dementia

Do you care for a person living with Alzheimer’s disease or another form of dementia? Has bath time has been a struggle for you both?

It’s easy to understand why that may be: All of your adult life you have bathed or showered in privacy, using a routine that fits your personal preferences best.

Now imagine someone else trying to undress and bathe you? How you would feel?

For most people, bathing is a highly personal matter, and that doesn’t change if dementia sets in.

This is why we put together 11 tips to help make bath time a little less stressful:

1. **Consider their preferences**: When living independently, did the person you are caring for prefer to take a bath or a shower? Did they prefer to wash up early in the morning or evening? And which toiletries did they like to use? The more you know and the more you follow their preferred hygiene routine, the more natural it will feel to the person in your care.

2. **Respect their privacy**: If at all possible, have only you and the person you are caring for in the room. The more people join you, the more awkward and uncomfortable the experience will likely be for the person living with dementia.

3. **Put yourself in their shoes**: One surefire way to have a more understanding and compassionate bathing experience for you both is to visualize yourself in the role of the person being bathed, and how you would feel. Empathy is a crucial piece to compassionate caregiving, and can help you develop a more respectful care approach.

4. **Caregiver of the same sex**: With the exception of having a spouse or possibly a close relative do the care, most people living with dementia (and those without!) are likely to feel more comfortable to undress in front of a person of the same gender.
5. **Have supplies prepared and nearby:** Having to get up and leave during the bathing session can create feelings of uncertainty and discomfort for the person with dementia. (If you get disconnected from the person you might even have to start all over again as the momentum has been lost.) So make sure you **plan ahead, keep a stash of clean towels and other supplies within arm’s reach for an uninterrupted, smoother bathing experience.**

6. **Heat up the room:** No one likes to take off their clothes in a cold room. **Turn the heat up so the space is nice and cozy** (you as the caregiver should be sweating). A hot room will make it less likely the person will resist taking their clothes off; they might even want to!

7. **Allow for some modesty:** Take a warm towel (fresh out of the dryer) and drape one around their shoulders and one over their lap to create a sense of privacy. Now **wet them through the towel** (and their underwear if it makes them more comfortable to leave it on at first). Once the towel (and their clothes) are nice and wet they are more likely to want to take them off without a fight.

8. **Get in a non-threatening position:** When dementia sets in, a person’s peripheral vision (how much you can see out of the corner of your eyes) gets smaller and smaller. So you want to make sure not to come at people from behind (a big no no!) or the side. Instead, gently approach a person from the front and then crouch or sit down (at or below eye level) on their dominant side. Why? While you want to first approach them from the front to make sure they see you, staying in front of a person can be seen as threatening. So once you know they are aware of your presence, move to their dominant side where they keep most of their muscle memory. And why does muscle memory matter? Watch the short video excerpt of “The Art of Caregiving” with Teepa Snow to find out. Visit [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxwJgDg3bYU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxwJgDg3bYU)

9. **Use Strong Visual Cues:** Be respectful and **communicate to the person what you are about to do BEFORE you do it**, step by step. To do so, use strong visual cues paired with short and poignant verbal cues. In example, mimic washing your armpits and tell the person “I’m going to wash right there” before you move to touch the person.

10. **Maintain a physical connection:** Place one hand on their shoulder and leave it there while using the other hand to wash the person. This creates sense of security and
comfort for the person you are caring for. *(Try this for yourself: Have a friend or coworker mimic doing personal care on you. Now have them place their hand on your shoulder and repeat the same task. Can you feel the difference?)*

11. **Wash their head last, if not later:** Depending on how the bathing experience goes, you may lay a washcloth with shampoo on it on the person’s head (shampoo-side down), and gently wet their head through the fabric. This avoids rubbing motion and friction that might cause irritation. If the person feels too uncomfortable or the bathing experience hasn’t gone as smoothly, consider washing their face and hair later when they are clothed. You can do so in a sink, try dry shampoo, or take them to a beauty salon.

dı Always remember to provide a warm, respectful atmosphere and consider the person’s feelings throughout the entire process. Understand and accept that it may take time to develop a sense of comfort and routine between the two of you. Bathing does not have to end up in a fight if you approach it with understanding, time and respect for the person living with dementia.

dı The steps above are a great starting point. If you want to know even more to offer the best caregiving experience possible, make sure you watch Teepa Snow’s full 2 hour program “The Art of Caregiving.” Teepa offers many more step-by-step tips for bathing, as well as how to dress, help them eat and safely move a person living with dementia. Learn more at www.pineseducation.org/product/art-of-caregiving