

Should You Tell Someone They Have Dementia? (And What If They Don't Believe It?)



A difficult moment for families is not the diagnosis itself, but what comes after it. The question usually arrives quietly at first, then with panic: “*When do I tell them?*” or “*How do I tell them?*” and sometimes even, “*Do I tell them at all?*”

When a person living with dementia does not accept the diagnosis, or genuinely believes the doctor is wrong, families can feel trapped between honesty and harm. And honestly, this is not always a simple decision. It requires understanding the person, their ability to process information, and what the outcome of that conversation is likely to be.

The first thing to understand is that **not telling someone “dementia” is not automatically wrong**, and telling them is not automatically right. The damage is not found in the word itself — the damage comes from what the word *does* to the person emotionally, and what it changes inside the relationship.

For some people, hearing “dementia” becomes a heavy identity shock. They don’t hear a medical term — they hear “*I’m stupid. I’m broken. I’m losing myself.*” If that word triggers fear, shame, rage, or distress, and the person cannot hold onto the information long enough for it to bring any clarity, then repeating it can become a form of emotional injury. In those cases, families often end up “breaking the news” again and again without meaning to — each time causing fresh grief, confusion, and resistance.

However, there are also situations where not telling someone can create harm in a different way. If a person still has enough insight to participate in decisions, plan ahead, or make choices about their future, then avoiding the truth can lead to them being excluded from their own life. This becomes especially important when it comes to safety, legal planning, healthcare decisions, driving, or changes in living arrangements.

Many people living with dementia *feel* that something is wrong long before they can name it, and when nobody acknowledges what is happening, anxiety often grows in the background. It can become suspicion, frustration, or anger — not because they are difficult, but because their reality is changing and nobody is giving it words.

So when should you tell them? The simplest answer is this: **tell them when it still supports their dignity and agency**. If the person can understand enough to be part of the journey — even if they can’t fully grasp the medical complexity — then the conversation becomes less about delivering a label and more about protecting their identity. But telling someone does not have to

mean speaking the diagnosis like a sentence. It can be framed gently and truthfully in a way that meets the person emotionally. For many people, “dementia” is too big and too emotionally loaded, but “your brain is finding some things harder lately” is something they can sit with. “Your memory isn’t working the way it used to, and we’re going to support you with that” is often more helpful than forcing the word that makes them feel attacked or ashamed. The aim is not to win a debate — the aim is to preserve trust.

This is where denial becomes something families misunderstand. Denial is often assumed to be stubbornness, but in dementia it frequently has a different meaning. Sometimes the brain cannot recognise its own changes — not because the person is lying, but because insight is reduced. Sometimes it is fear. Sometimes it is self-protection. And sometimes the person is simply coping in the only way their mind can tolerate. This is why pushing harder rarely helps. Families can become locked into constant correction, constant proof, constant arguing — and none of it creates acceptance. It only creates defensiveness.

So what happens if they are in denial? **You still assist them. Always.** Denial does not remove the need for care. It only changes the *approach*. This is where person-led support becomes vital. Instead of trying to convince someone they have dementia, you start responding to what they are experiencing in the moment. You validate the frustration instead of correcting the logic. You protect confidence instead of forcing agreement. You simplify tasks, reduce stress, adapt the environment, and offer help in ways that feel respectful rather than controlling. Because the goal isn’t for the person to “admit it.” The goal is for them to feel safe enough to live their life without being constantly challenged.

A powerful example is something many families see daily: the person pressing random numbers on the TV remote and becoming angry when it “doesn’t work.” There is no benefit in saying “You’re confused because you have dementia.” That statement doesn’t help them watch TV. It doesn’t restore control. It only increases shame. But saying “That’s frustrating, isn’t it? Let me do this part with you,” keeps dignity intact while still providing support. This is not dishonesty. This is care. It’s responding to the emotion and meeting the need, not policing the explanation.

At Launex, we often say this: **your care does not depend on their acceptance of the diagnosis.** It depends on your ability to adapt your communication. The relationship becomes the anchor. Truth can still exist, but it must be delivered with wisdom, timing, and compassion — because dementia changes how truth is received. If the diagnosis strengthens planning and shared decision-making, it matters. If the diagnosis only creates repeat trauma, then the better path is often to focus on reassurance, practical support, and emotional safety.

You don’t need to fight for the word “dementia” to give meaningful care. You need to protect the person inside the diagnosis. And sometimes, that means the most powerful support is not “telling them what is wrong.” It is reminding them of what is still right — that they are valued, safe, supported, and not alone.

If this post hit home for you, please know this: you don’t need to “convince” someone living with dementia — you need to **communicate in a way their brain can still accept.**

Our course teaches you how to do that in real life, with real examples, and without the guilt. You can access the training through **LAUNEX LTD** here:

You can explore the course here: <https://launexltd.com>

