

Self-harm and dementia

Being diagnosed with dementia can lead to a person experiencing a range of emotions, including a sense of grief and loss. Sometimes these emotions can be so intense that they lead to self-harm. This flyer gives people living with dementia, their families, and carers some information about research on self-harm and dementia.

Background

- Sometimes people living with dementia can engage in self-harm or feel like harming themselves.
- Self-harming could include things like cutting your skin, overusing alcohol or drugs, or intentionally hitting yourself.
- Self-harming may also include engaging in risky behaviour, like walking across a busy road where there is traffic.
- Sometimes self-harm and dementia are related. People living with dementia can have a heightened risk of self-harm, and self-harm later in life may be a sign of dementia.

New research

- Researchers at UNSW Sydney were interested in finding out more about dementia and self-harm.
- They looked at hospital data from people living with dementia and people who had self-harmed in New South Wales from 2001-2015.

What you should know about

- The study found that around 0.43% of people living with dementia engaged in self-harm.
- Self-harm can happen to anyone with dementia, but people living with dementia around the age of 70 were most at risk.
- The first two years after a dementia diagnosis were the most likely time for self-harm to happen.
- Self-harm sometimes happened before a person realised that they were living with dementia, particularly if they were older.
- Self-harm happened more often in men than women living with dementia, and more often in people with poor mental health.
- Connecting people living with dementia to mental health services can improve health outcomes.

Recommendations for people living with dementia and their carers

It is important that people diagnosed with dementia have access to appropriate support options. We have put some options for people living with dementia below.

We recommend:

- Talking to your doctor about connecting with mental health support services early in your dementia journey to reduce the risk of needing emergency support later.
- If you are over 65 and are having problems with your mental health, talk to your doctor about them.
- If you are living with dementia and considering harming yourself, or are worried that someone you know living with dementia may harm themselves, you can call:
 - The National Dementia Helpline: Free call 1800 100 500 or email helpline@dementia.org.au
 - Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service: 1800 699 799
 - Lifeline: 13 11 14

The National Dementia Helpline provides support and information to all Australians impacted by all forms of dementia, in any location across Australia. The helpline provides support at every stage from pre-diagnosis onwards and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Call the helpline on 1800 100 500.

For more information about this project, please contact
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If you would like to read more about the research, visit
<https://doi.org/10.1002/alz.13080>.