

Praying with Dementia Patients and Alzheimer's Patients

By [Karen Barber](#) | January 23, 2020

This Praying with dementia patients and Alzheimer's patients article has simple prayer ideas that can be used by caregivers, family members, clergy and church members to actively engage their loved ones in prayer.

Doing simple prayer activities with memory care patients in prayer can stimulate memories and enable them to connect with God despite their limitations. It also enables us to give loved ones the peace, encouragement and strength of prayer.

Strategies for praying with dementia patients and Alzheimer's patients

In the following ideas you will be leading and enabling the prayer while inviting your loved one to respond with a posture, a gesture or a word. The common theme in all of these prayer ideas is create a way for your loved one to do something concrete to participate in prayer.

Observers have reported unexpected moments of clarity in memory care patients in response to familiar prayers and hymns. Although these are unpredictable and sometimes rare, *be content to know that prayer is something mysterious that happens in our hearts and spirits* where we may not perceive their activity.

A writer friend of mine recently interviewed a chaplain who believes that those in memory care lose their earliest childhood memories last. Since we were with God even before we were born while still in the womb, this awareness of God and familiar prayers and songs are often retained until the very end.

Since Alzheimer's and Dementia patients differ in their abilities and these change over time, choose from the following ideas to decide which ones your loved one might be able to best enjoy.

Familiar church prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer

Using familiar church prayers is a good way of praying with dementia patients and Alzheimer's patients. If your loved one attended church regularly from an early age they learned church prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer or the Our Father by heart. Set a time each day or each time you are together to "say your prayers" together. Then tell your loved one you are going to say the Lord's Prayer and you will pray out loud and they can pray quietly in their heart with you.

Other prayers that might be something your loved one can relate to might include church refrains such as the Glory be to the father. Prayers with melodies attached to them such as this one have double staying power in our minds.

Denominational prayer, such as the Rosary is another example of a prayer that might have formed a lasting prayer memory.

And don't overlook childhood prayers, such as "*Now I lay me down to sleep.*"

Short response prayers

If your loved one still engages in simple verbal communications, you can use prayers where there is a short response in several places in the prayer that is repeated. A familiar response from group prayer in church congregations is "Lord, hear our prayer."

In the *“Lord, hear our prayer”* prayer you would pray a sentence about someone in your family or for some need of your loved one and then pause and say, *“now let’s say Lord hear our prayer together.”* Then you would pray another sentence prayer, keeping in mind to limit the number of different prayer sentences to your loved one’s attention span.

For a simpler refrain, you could use one word such as *“amen”* which means *“so be it.”* Use the same technique of praying a sentence prayer then saying *“Now let’s say amen together.”*

Yes, and no prayers

While talking to a man in our church who has Alzheimer’s I noticed that the conversation worked best if I asked him yes or no questions such as, *“Do you like cake?”* Even if he didn’t exactly understand what I was saying, he could say either yes, no or I don’t know.

You can give your loved one the opportunity to shape your prayers by doing a yes or no prayer. As an example, you could say, *“Can we pray for your cough today?”*

If you’re loved one says yes, then say a one sentence prayer about their cough. Then ask another prayer subject question.

If they say no, you can pray something like, *“God, thank you that my loved one’s cough isn’t bothering them today.”*

If they say *“I don’t know”* you can pray something like, *“God I thank you that you know my loved one’s heart and that even when they don’t know what to pray, your spirit prays for them inside their heart.”* (See Romans 8:27 *“And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”* NIV)

Using Grace over meals when praying with dementia patients and Alzheimer’s patients

Meal time is a great opportunity to engage your loved one in prayer, especially if they have been in a habit of saying grace all their life.

You can simply ask *“Would you like me to say grace?”* and then say one. Their agreement has given them the choice to engage in prayer, even if they aren’t the ones saying it.

If they aren’t able to answer, you can say something like, *“You taught me how to say grace when I was little and now I am so glad I can say grace for you to show you how thankful I am for your help.”*

Grace is usually very simple and brief, which makes it a perfect prayer pathway for memory care patients. Maybe you have a grace your loved one often said before meals. When I was a girl we said the, *“God is great, God is good”* grace which is short and simple.

Pointing to pictures prayer

In this prayer idea you gather a small group of pictures of familiar people and things from your loved one’s life that might be good subjects for prayers of thankfulness or prayers of blessing.

Examples include pictures of family members, dear friends, pets, favorite places such as a home or their church, hobbies they used to engage in such as a picture of a piano or golf clubs.

Depending on the person's abilities glue 2-4 pictures per page on a piece of paper. Tell your loved one that these are your prayer subject idea pictures.

Show your loved one a page and asked them to point to a picture that they would like to pray with you about today. You of course would do the praying on the subject they chose.

As an example, if they chose their deceased pet Pumpkin, you might say a short prayer of thankfulness for the joy Pumpkin gave us etc.

If they chose a picture of a living person you might say a prayer of blessing for them, making sure to mention the name of the person and the relationship to your loved one. You might say, *"My loved one wants us to pray for her daughter Sally today."* Then pray about one of Sally's current life situation needs you know about. In this way, your loved one can participate in intercession on a higher, more detailed level than their limitations allow.

If they are unable or unwilling to point at the card, you can say, *"I see you're drawn to the looking at the picture of the old home place today."* Then say a prayer of thanksgiving appropriate to the subject.

Folded hands, bowed head prayer

In this idea for praying with dementia patients and Alzheimer's patients and the ideas that follow it, you will be engaging your loved one in symbolic means of prayer that are nonverbal yet hold powerful meaning as a form of prayer. In these symbolic ways of participating in prayer, you would instruct your loved one to do the gesture, posture or action while you say a short prayer out loud.

The most typical prayer posture is with hands folded and head bowed. This gesture is used almost exclusively to indicate prayer. Helping your loved one assume this posture helps their bodies and spirits know that they are participating in prayer.

Holding candles prayer while praying with dementia patients and Alzheimer's patients

Candles are another very powerful prayer symbol. For obvious reasons, you don't want to use real candles with a memory care patient. Fortunately, these days you can buy inexpensive votive size battery operated candles.

There are two ways you can use battery operated candles to engage your loved one in prayer:

The first is to have them hold a lit candle in their hand as you pray.

The second is to have 3 or 4 candles with a different names written on them with permanent marker. You can then ask, *"Which one of these candles would you like to light in prayer today?"* When they chose one, you turn it on and then say a prayer for the person named on the candle. This is a simple way to recreate the practice of lighting a candle for someone in a church sanctuary.

Praying with beads

Beads have also been long associated with prayer, notably with The Rosary. Traditionally beads have been used to keep track of the subject of your prayers as your finger moves from bead to bead.

If prayer beads are a part of your loved one's church background, pray the traditional prayers associated with each bead and guide them to touch each bead for each prayer.

You can purchase large prayer beads and prayer beads that are suitable for praying with dementia patients and Alzheimer's patients.

Hand held cross

Physically holding a small cross is another symbolic way to pray. You can use a traditional cross or you can purchase one that's handcrafted with curves to fit well into a person's hand. If you're crafty, you can even make your own hand cross using self-hardening clay.

Invite your loved one to hold onto the cross as you say a brief prayer.

Chapel visits when praying with dementia patients and Alzheimer's patients

If your loved one lives in a facility with a small chapel, you might consider taking them to the chapel for prayer. I'm a believer in places of prayer that help us feel God's presence and a chapel visit may help bring God's peace.

If your loved one is mobile and enjoys riding in the car, you can take them to a chapel or place of prayer, such as a prayer garden.

You can either whisper a short prayer with your loved one or tell them that you're there to pray silently if they prefer.

Stuffed animal prayer partners

Many memory care patients enjoy stuffed animals. There are a variety of teddy bears and other stuffed animals and dolls used to help children pray. Some may have the bear or doll with their hands folded in a posture of prayer.

Others actually have recorded prayers that play at a push of a button. I have seen ones that say The Lord's Prayer and also the bedtime prayer "*Now I lay me down to sleep.*" (This one was super cute because it was a little angel and the prayer was recorded in a very sweet child's voice.)

To find a stuffed prayer pal I googled "praying doll" and found a number of different choices.

Your loved one may find a stuffed prayer partner comforting and helpful as a way to pray.

Prayer blankets or shawls

Many churches have a prayer blanket or prayer shawl ministry. The prayer blanket ministry at our church makes small blankets from soft fleece material for free distribution to anyone in need of God's comforting help.

When praying with dementia patients and Alzheimer's patients, instead of making such a blanket a onetime gift to your loved one, you might consider using it as their prayer blanket or shawl that you put around them every time you pray with them. You can pray "*that God's comfort and peace will surround them like this warm blanket today.*"

Although a prayer shawl is not specifically mentioned in the Bible, it is part of the ancient Jewish custom of wearing a tallit. This outer garment symbolized dwelling under God's protection and was worn for prayer.