

Supporting Older Autistic Adults with Dementia

Practical Tips for Families and Clinicians

As some older autistic adults will be diagnosed with dementia or other cognitive changes here are a few key adaptations that can make a big difference in your and their quality of life.

● Recognize Sensory Needs

Be aware of heightened or reduced sensitivity to light, noise, texture, and temperature.

- ✓ Use soft, natural lighting and avoid flickering bulbs.
- ✓ Minimize background noise and sudden sounds.
- ✓ Choose clothing and bedding materials that are comfortable to the touch.

● Support Predictability and Routine

Routine helps reduce anxiety and confusion.

- ✓ Stick to familiar daily rhythms for meals, rest, and activities.
- ✓ Use visual schedules or written prompts if helpful.
- ✓ Introduce changes slowly and with explanation, whenever possible.

● Simplify the Environment

Cognitive decline can increase disorientation. A calm, organized space helps.

- ✓ Declutter surfaces and keep walkways clear.
- ✓ Label cabinets or rooms with words and pictures.
- ✓ Use contrasting colors to highlight doors, furniture, or items used daily.

● Adapt Communication

Autistic adults may already use non-traditional communication styles; dementia can make this more pronounced.

- ✓ Give extra time for responses and avoid rushing conversations.
- ✓ Use clear, simple language—and supplement with gestures or visual supports.
- ✓ Pay attention to nonverbal cues (facial expression, body language, tone).

● Use a Support Team

Don't go it alone—aging and caregiving are both team efforts.

- ✓ Find providers who understand both autism and dementia, or are willing to learn.
- ✓ Involve social workers, housing adaptation experts, or communication specialists.
- ✓ Join support groups that focus on autism, dementia, or both.

● Plan Ahead

Look into these future needs.

- ✓ Consider legal and financial planning for long-term care.
- ✓ Talk about future housing preferences and medical decisions with the person.
- ✓ Explore autism-informed senior living, memory care, or in-home support options.

◆ Helpful Resources

- National Task Group on Intellectual Disabilities and Dementia Practices (www.the-ntg.org/autism-and-dementia)
- Autism Speaks (<https://www.autismspeaks.org>)
- The Arc's Center for Future Planning (<https://futureplanning.thearc.org>)



The National Task Group's Challenging Thinking! Project
<https://www.the-ntg.org/changingthinking>

