

Bookcase Analogy Transcript

Hi, I'm Natalie. I'm a Dementia Friends Champion and I'm going to explain dementia to you in the way that it was explained to me. It's not a scientific explanation but it should give you some insight into how dementia might affect someone. But, remember, dementia affects each person in different ways.

First of all, I'd like you to imagine that I'm 80 years old and that beside me there's a bookcase that's as tall as I am and it's filled with books. Each of those books represents a memory, a fact, something that I've learnt in the last 80 years. Right by my head would be my most recent memories, maybe what I had for breakfast this morning. By my shoulders I might have my 60s, maybe my retirement party. By my knees I'd probably have my 20s, so maybe when I met my partner. And then all the way down by my feet would be my childhood memories, maybe my first day of school.

Dementia rocks my bookcase. So, as it rocks my bookcase, what do you think is likely to happen to those books? They're going to fall out, aren't they? And which ones do you think are likely to fall out first? The ones at the top. So, that might explain why my short term memory would be affected first. As my dementia progresses, I might find that my most recent memories, that's to say, the books that are highest on my bookcase, being from further down from earlier in my life.

Now, say I've got to the point where all of my top shelves are empty and I'm living in the 1950s. I want you to embrace my reality. I'm going to go into my kitchen today and try and make myself a cup of tea. But, remember, I think I'm living in the 1950s. So, what's going to be different about my kitchen? You're probably thinking the layout, the appliances. Now, remember, I want to make tea. The kettle, right? It's likely to be electric rather than a whistling kettle that you put on the hob. You might see me when you come round one day filling up my electric kettle and doing what with it? Putting it on the hob. Now, say that you're my loved one, my carer, my friend, and you see me doing this. You might be tempted to say, 'You cannot make your own tea anymore. It's just too dangerous.' But how might that make me feel? I might feel sad, frustrated, like I'm losing my independence. Thirsty.

Now, as I said, embrace my reality. What could you do differently to help me to make my own tea for longer? You could buy me a whistling kettle. Now, of course, I'm not saying that's going to help everybody at different points in their dementia but at this point it would help me. So, this just goes to show how embracing my reality can really help me to live well with my dementia.

From what you've heard so far you might think that someone with dementia loses everything but actually that's because I've only told you about one part of the brain. I've told you about my factual bookcase. Now, this represents my hippocampus. That's the part of my brain where I manage factual and biographical data, so things like names and faces and dates and numbers. And, unfortunately, it's built with really flimsy wood and it's not very resistant to dementia which is why it's going to rock so much and I'm more likely to lose those books.

However, there's another part of my brain that manages my feelings and my emotions. That part of the brain is called the amygdala and it's much more resistant to dementia. So I'd like you to picture that as a separate bookcase but that is made of solid oak. So, even though it will be rocked, the contents will be safer for longer.

Now let me explain to you how the two bookcases work together. Say, when I was a child, I had a teacher. So, the fact of that teacher is going to go way down by my feet on my factual bookcase. But the way he made me feel, which was inspired and like I could do anything in my life, it's going to go on the emotional bookcase.

Let me give you some examples of how that might work today when I have dementia. So, say, think again, you're my loved one, my carer, my friend and you come round and we have a blazing row. We have a really big argument because I've forgotten your name. Now, the fact of that argument is going to go on my factual bookcase. What feelings do you think are going to go onto my emotional bookcase? Sadness, anger, frustration. And as you go home you might think, 'It doesn't matter. She's going to forget that we had the argument and that I shouted at her.' And you're right, I probably will. But what's likely to stay with me are those feelings of sadness and anger and frustration with nothing to connect it to.

I'm going to leave with a positive example. So, I'd like you to picture that you've come to visit me. We've gone out to the seaside, we had an ice-cream, we had a brilliant day and I feel safe and warm and loved. But on the way home I've forgotten the ice-cream and I've forgotten the day out and you might think it's just not worth visiting anymore. But look! You've left me with these feelings of happiness and safety and love and that's what really matters.

At Dementia Friends we want to encourage everybody who knows somebody with dementia to continue to visit and spend time with people with dementia and help them to live well. And always remember there is more to the person than the dementia. Thank you.