

# Universal Design...Beyond Grab Bars - Staying Home with Memory Loss

*"Sometimes, something is familiar to me. Most times there is no recognition of the fabric of my life. Only frayed remnants of who I once was."*

Regardless of the disability, staying in a loving and caring home is still the most desired place to be. Because 1 in 3 people are afflicted with dementia or Alzheimer's disease, design for these chronically ill patients who wish to stay at home is beginning to emerge as a compelling area of study. The challenge is how do you design for the progressive nature and unpredictability of this disease. There is no set answer. Designing for these individuals is a new frontier for designers.

Behavioral and cognitive changes are always challenging—it can be a strategy as well as a design. Aside from our usual safety grab bars, ideally, we want people to be able to make sense of their environment; maximize their awareness without over-stimulating their senses visually or acoustically. Although some suggestions below are for the more severe patient, most can be modified to accommodate us all.

Remember, when designing for a person with memory loss, we're not only focused on the physical world around the person, but the thinking world as well while minimizing stress. Here are a few design suggestions that are linked to therapeutic goals, such as increasing mobility, reducing confusion, promoting safety, and maximizing functional abilities. Here are some tips:

- **Analyze:**

Pay close attention to what the memory impaired person sees, hears, smells and touches that is increasingly less familiar. Missing items? What do they see...Ever look into the mirror only to find that someone else is staring back at you? Trying to walk through a closed door? What do they hear...Hearing sounds no one else hears? What do they smell...Smelling the odor of mothballs in grandmother's attic but where is the attic and where is granny?

- **Lighting:**

We all need good lighting! Lighting can help control behavior, increase safety and offer comfort and a feeling of security. The goal of lighting is to mimic daylight. Choose lamps that identify the light as "day glow" "natural". Can't find your way? Use sticky-backed reflector tape...indoors or outdoors. Install dimmers to help keep light at daylight intensity. Use table lamps that are directed to a surface. Reduce shadows as these can be interpreted as a "hole". Keep floor areas clear and simple—no throw rugs.



- **Color for Highlighting:**

Using unique colors for different areas and spaces will help a person move from one space to another without getting lost. Use "Flat" rather than high gloss paint on walls to eliminate shadows. Use contrasting colors to identify differences in objects in a room. Colorful objects in a kitchen are easier to see. Painting a wall behind a toilet in a darker contrasting color, laying out clothing on a bed that is contrasted in color makes items easier to see. A bedroom in a simple color with the splash of color on the bed draws attention to the bed for sleeping. Try not to use monochromatic color schemes where everything looks the same unless you want to use:

**Color for Camouflage:** Camouflage objects to avoid...place a black mat inside the front door to suggest a chasm that can't be crossed. This is much more positive than continually giving negative commands to stay away or saying "no". Along this same line...paint doors and use matching door hardware to conceal doorway not to be used.

**Color Rule of thumb:** Use a simple but strong palette...colors in the middle of the spectrum work best. Light colors tend to blend too much. Saturated colors are unsettling. Checks, stripes and strong contrasts that create a vibrating sense result in confusion—black/white; red/green. Keep it simple, repeat designs, plaids, florals are more welcoming.

- **Textures, Furniture and Finishes:**

In hearing loss, soft flooring materials are more acoustically desired. However, a person's gait can change with age and with memory loss diseases. You might notice that an elderly person may walk with shuffle. Too soft of a carpet/flooring can result in falls. Keep flooring tight and flat. Consider a glue down carpet or cork flooring. Consider simulated hardwood flooring. If you already have tile don't shine it—glare can create an illusion of water or ice and can be frightening.

Keep pathways clear, Use visuals as a guide down a hallway—paint, murals, wallpaper; de-clutter; as motor skills diminish balance can be more difficult; use short seated chairs with arms for support; gliders are better than rocking chairs - they're easier to get in and out of; built-in cabinetry is stable; limit mirrors—as the disease progresses images can be frightening; keep other wall hangings simple; no-glare glass on pictures; fish tanks can add hours of viewing and can be calming; use images to replace words or labels.



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- *Safety Devices-things you might not have thought of before:*

Safety gates for stairs and tamper-proof locks, remove fireplace accessories and obscure the opening by putting something interesting inside such as a large floral arrangement. If your stove is electric have your electrician install a "kill switch" making it impossible to turn on. If you have gas, consult your gas company.

- *Home Areas:*

Encouraging socialization is important and chairs at angles to each other encourage conversation. People with memory loss may not know how to initiate conversation. A chair over in the corner of a room encourages quietness and solitude.



- *Outdoors:*

Repair pavement to make it smooth. Pathways with colorful plantings can lead one through the space. With seating areas, resting can allow calming walk through the garden. Wind chimes, bird feeders can all be visually interesting. Raised planters about 3 feet high can encourage participatory gardening. Herbs provide wonderful fragrances and some provide wonderful blooms. Plants that are not poisonous are most desirable as they can be eaten safely.

- *Noise and Sound:*

Impaired memory loss doesn't mean an inability to hear. It can mean, however, that everyday sounds become unfamiliar. And it means that those sounds can be interpreted differently. Televisions, telephone, and other appliances even a flushing toilet can become agitating. When more than one person speaks at a time or an object drops on the floor or any loud noises can be startling and result in fearful response. Background noises such as a furnace/heater can be interpreted as noise coming from one's own head. Observing a persons behavior/reaction can result in clues to solutions. Insulation, heavy or fabric wall coverings can help diffuse sound. Fabric window coverings can be very beneficial.

*Remember...all the above suggestions are just that...suggestions. Keep in mind that as the disease of memory loss progresses, differences in the intensity of person's perception of depth and contrast will change. You may have to adjust some things over time. Be observant...Over stimulation of too many objects can paralyze someone with memory loss and the ability to make discerning decisions such as standing or sitting can be impossible. Simple environmental changes can make huge differences in the comfort level of your loved one.*

*Many of these suggestions can apply to all of us as we age in place.*

*"You are smiling at me. I see my reflection in your eyes. I've finally found someone who speaks my language."* Quotes are from: [Learning to Speak Alzheimer's](#)



*Remember, good design is always beautiful, regardless of the specialty you're designing for. A house should be designed not just for who you are today, but also for the person you'll become tomorrow.*

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