



Arthur and the Forgetful Elephant

story and art by
Maria Girón

★ “Powerful, playful, emotional, and so worth a place on the bookshelf.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

A Discussion and Activity Guide about Memory Loss

Although *Arthur and the Forgetful Elephant* can be read simply as a tale of friendship, it can also introduce children to the condition of severe memory loss. This guide is designed to help connect the story to the serious topic of dementia. It defines dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, suggests answers for questions children may ask, and offers activities a child and an affected adult may be able to do together. The examples focus on a grandfather relationship, as represented by Arthur’s elephant friend. Yet dementia and Alzheimer’s may affect many different types of people in a child’s life—a grandmother, a great uncle or aunt, or even a younger relative or friend.

With young children, simply saying that a loved one has a disease that makes them forget things may be enough in the early stages. Older children may want more detail or be curious about what lies ahead. Let your child’s questions guide the conversation. It’s best to be honest about the challenges while offering reassurance. If your child asks questions you don’t know how to answer or if you sense they’re getting upset, suggest taking a break and talking more later.

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Helping Children Understand

What’s wrong with the elephant? What are dementia and Alzheimer’s disease?

When someone has dementia, it means their brain isn’t working well. Our brains are amazing! They send signals that enable us to think, remember names and facts, and control our emotions and bodies. When something interferes with the brain’s signals, it can be hard to do even simple tasks. (Check out this [experiment](#) for an example.) If a person’s brain gets so damaged that normal life becomes impossible, it’s called having [dementia](#). Dementia is sometimes caused by an injury to the brain, but more often it is caused by diseases. Alzheimer’s is the most common brain disease. It causes 60 to 80 percent of all cases of dementia. To learn more about Alzheimer’s and dementia, visit www.alz.org, www.alzfdn.org, www.dementia.org, or www.dementiasociety.org.

What happens when someone has Alzheimer's? What are the symptoms?

"I can't remember who I am or where I live or . . . anything!"

Alzheimer's affects everyone differently. Sometimes people can remember words to a song they heard long ago but will lose track of where they put their shoes or forget a person whom they just met. It's hard to predict exactly what symptoms a person will have, but here are the most common:

Mild Symptoms

- forgetting words or names
- trouble performing simple tasks
- forgetting material they just read
- losing objects
- struggling to plan or organize their day

Moderate Symptoms

- forgetting recent events
- forgetting their address or telephone number
- getting confused about where they are or what day it is
- needing help choosing proper clothing
- sleeping during the day and staying up at night
- wandering and getting lost

Most Serious Symptoms

- needing help with every part of daily life
- being unaware of their surroundings
- failing to recognize friends and family
- having trouble walking or talking
- being more vulnerable to infections

Sometimes I forget things and get confused.
Does that mean I have Alzheimer's?

"Sometimes I forget where my toys are."

There's no reason to worry about occasionally forgetting things. Everyone does! No brain can store everything, even if it's in perfect condition. [Forgetting](#) can even be an important part of maintaining a healthy brain. Sometimes the brain needs to clear out things that are no longer important to make way for new information. There's cause for concern only when someone starts to forget *many* things and has symptoms like those listed above.



Will Grandpa forget me?

"My name's Arthur. What's yours?"

'I forget,' sobbed the elephant."



There might be some days when Grandpa can't remember names. He might even forget his own name sometimes, just like the elephant did. Changes deep inside his brain make it hard for him to remember details, so if he makes a mistake, correcting him won't help. Play along with whatever name Grandpa uses, just like playing a game of pretend with a friend. It's possible to have a good relationship with someone even if they don't always know who you are. [Dan's story](#) is a good example.

Will Grandpa get better?
Is he going to die from Alzheimer's disease?

"And then the elephant remembered—just a little bit."

There will be good days and bad days. Memories may return for a while, only to be lost again. A person's mood can change each day too. This is normal for people with Alzheimer's.

Currently, Alzheimer's can't be cured, although medications can slow its effects. The disease usually progresses gradually over a period of years, so no one can predict what Grandpa's cause of death will be. It could be Alzheimer's disease or something else. The important thing is to enjoy the good days and try not to worry about what will happen next. Focusing on the present instead of worrying about the past or the future is sometimes called [mindfulness](#). Practicing mindfulness can be helpful when dealing with big challenges.



Helping Children Empathize



Why does forgetting things make Grandpa so different?
He doesn't seem like the same person.

"What if I forgot really important things?"

Because the brain controls emotions and moods, people with Alzheimer's forget more than facts and names. They sometimes forget what they used to enjoy and how they used to behave. People who had been outgoing may become quiet and want to be alone. Someone who once loved to watch game shows might suddenly prefer cooking shows. There will be ups and downs and lots of changes. Whatever happens, it's important to remember that unexpected behavior is caused by the disease. It isn't anyone's fault.

Why is Grandpa so impatient with me? I'm just trying to help.

"If I forgot EVERYTHING, I'd be sad and lonely and scared."

Most people can remember a time of being discouraged about trying to learn something new and being unable to get it right, no matter how hard they tried. Grandpa once knew how to do many things well, but then he forgot. The illness makes it hard or impossible for him to do things he used to do easily, and he may become [frustrated](#) and [anxious](#). That can make a person grumpy! Alzheimer's also diminishes self-control, so Grandpa might say unkind things without meaning to. It's the disease—Grandpa isn't mad. It may help to distract him by changing the subject or turning his focus to something else. It's also OK to walk away for a while and try spending time with Grandpa later, when he's feeling better.

Helping Children Take Action



Can I help Grandpa get his memory back?

"Poor elephant. Maybe I can help!"

When someone has Alzheimer's, nothing will repair their memory. But a person doesn't need a good memory to have a good time! Although fun isn't a cure, it can be a big help. Spending time with a person shows that you care, and sometimes a [conversation](#) is all it takes to brighten someone's day. Remember, Grandpa might not know how to respond and may say things that don't seem to make sense. Because confusion is part of the disease, correcting his facts won't help. It's best to play along. Perhaps one morning

Grandpa will mention that he just had dinner. Rather than saying, "But Grandpa, it's time for breakfast, not dinner!" it's better to treat the situation like a game of make-believe. Ask "What did you eat?" or say, "That sounds delicious!"

If I spend time with Grandpa, will I catch Alzheimer's disease from him?

"They played and played until the sun began to set."

Time together is good for everyone! Alzheimer's is not contagious. Scientists aren't sure what causes Alzheimer's or why some people get it and others don't, but no one catches it from another person.



What are some things we can do together?

"Come on, let's play!"

There are many things someone affected by dementia can do with another person. What do they enjoy? What are they able to do? What are they in the mood for today? Listening to music, watching a movie, or looking at photographs can be great ways to spend time together. People with dementia often revert to interests and habits from their past, so it may be helpful to think about what your loved one enjoyed as a child.

Togetherness is the goal. Be patient and figure out what works. The activity guide can help you get started, but use your imagination for other ideas!



Activity Guide

A child and a loved one with mild to moderate symptoms may be able to enjoy these activities together:

- Take a walk. Exercise can be very helpful. Even just walking around the yard a few times counts.
- [Move it](#) with a dance together!
- Bounce, roll, or toss a ball back and forth.
- Prepare a simple treat in the kitchen and enjoy eating together.
- Get creative! Color pictures, paint, or decorate the front walk or steps with sidewalk chalk.
- Work jigsaw puzzles. Choose simple puzzles with large pieces and colors that are easily matched.
- Plant some flowers or seeds and watch your garden grow.
- String beads to make a necklace.
- Play with dolls or stuffed animals.
- Play a simple game. UNO, Old Maid, Phase 10, Go Fish, and Coverall Bingo are good options.
- Look at a book of photos or paintings. Talk about what you imagine the place or person pictured is like.
- Sit outside and watch people or cars go by. Make up stories about where they might be going.
- Look at a family photo album. Add names beneath the pictures to make the people easier to identify.
- Play with modeling clay or large building blocks.
- Watch a favorite movie or television show.
- Enjoy a picnic in the backyard.
- Do simple household chores, such as washing dishes or folding laundry. People with dementia want to be needed, productive, and helpful like everyone else!
- Plan visits with animals. Many shelters allow volunteers to walk dogs! If your loved one is in a care facility, ask if they have an animal visitation program.



When symptoms are severe, activities may be difficult. Suggest these activities to your child, emphasizing that being present and showing love is the most important part:

- Give lots of hugs. Holding hands is good too.
- Offer a massage. Many older people have arthritis that makes their joints hurt. A gentle finger or wrist massage usually feels good.
- Decorate with handmade artwork, items of interest or meaning, or messages of encouragement, placing them where they can be easily seen and enjoyed later.
- Sing favorite songs or play favorite music.
- Share what's happening in your life. For example, talk about a friend and why you like that person. Or describe what's happening at school. Share anything you want! Even when a person doesn't seem to understand or can't respond, hearing a caring voice can be comforting.

