

# Dementia Friendly Object Handling Guide

## Introduction

At CAT, we’ve developed our own approach to running dementia-friendly object handling sessions, and this guide offers an overview of what we’ve learned along the way. It’s not a rulebook, and we don’t claim to be experts in dementia care. Instead, we’re sharing a method that has worked well for us, in the hope that it inspires others to create their own meaningful experiences.

The heart of object handling lies in sparking curiosity and encouraging conversation. These sessions are designed to open up opportunities for sharing stories, ideas, and memories; interactions that can have a powerful, positive impact on wellbeing.

That said, there’s no one-size-fits-all approach. What works for one group may not work for another, and that’s okay. We encourage you to adapt, experiment, and find the style that suits your participants best.

## Running an Object Handling Session

To help participants feel at ease, we recommend starting your sessions in a space that’s familiar to them. Trying something new or meeting unfamiliar people can be daunting, so a known environment can go a long way in building confidence and comfort.

Aim for group sizes of no more than ten people. This helps ensure everyone has the chance to speak, feel included, and engage at their own pace. It’s also important to offer a gentle way to step back. Participants should always feel free to disengage if they wish. We’ve found it helpful to have two team members: one to lead the session, and another in a nearby, quieter space for anyone who might prefer a relaxed chat and a cup of tea.

Select a small number of objects and take your time with each one. Encourage participants to explore them through touch, smell, and close observation. Some may naturally begin to share thoughts as they handle the object, while others might benefit from gentle prompts. Start with simple, open-ended questions like:

* What colour is it?
* Is it heavy or light?
* Does it have any decoration?
* What material is it made from?
* How does it feel?
* Does it remind you of anything?
* Would you have had something like this at home?
* Do you think it’s old or new? What makes you think that?

After everyone has had a chance to explore the object, summarise the group’s observations and invite others to build on what’s been shared. Then, you can begin to explore the object’s identity: what it might be, how it was used, how old it is, and how it was made. Encourage guesses and ideas, and offer clues if needed. The goal is to learn together, not to get the “right” answer.

Once the discussion has run its course, reveal the object’s identity and share a bit of background. Then, pass it around again; participants often enjoy seeing it anew with their fresh insights.

At the end of each session, take a moment to reflect with the group. What did they enjoy? What sparked conversation? Their feedback will help you shape even better sessions in the future.

## Objects to Use

When selecting objects for your session, try to choose items that don’t have an obvious use or purpose. This adds an element of mystery and encourages curiosity, imagination, and discussion. Everyday items from your home can work well, or you might be able to borrow objects from a local museum, archive, or community collection.

The goal isn’t to test knowledge; it’s to explore and learn together. That’s why it’s important to choose objects that are interesting, open to interpretation, and likely to spark conversation. Look for items that are tactile, visually intriguing, or have unusual features. The more there is to wonder about, the more opportunities there are for meaningful engagement.