SPACE

A Practical Method for Understanding and Supporting Someone Living with Dementia

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The ideas and frameworks presented in this book are intended to support understanding and practice in dementia care. They may be shared and applied in non-commercial settings.

We actively encourage translation and thoughtful cultural adaptation of this work so it can support caregivers in different contexts and communities. Where possible, we welcome opportunities to collaborate on translations to help ensure the integrity and intent of the framework are maintained.

Where the material is used as part of structured training, teaching, or commercial activity, we ask that this is done with appropriate acknowledgement and, where possible, in collaboration with the authors.

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For M,D & L,

With love, for showing us the path, and reminding us there is still work to be done.

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Preface

My dad would often ask to “go home”.

This was devastating to hear when we *were* already sitting in his home. I didn’t know how to respond.

Dad was mid-way through his journey with Alzheimer’s, and explaining we couldn’t go home, that he was already home, only created more confusion and discussion about why he couldn’t “go home”.

I had no way to truly understand the moment. I believed he was trying to tell me something, but I had no way to understand what it could be.

What was he experiencing that he expressed as wanting to go home? Did he have some sense of unfinished business? Did he not feel safe? Was he simply bored?

In time I came to see how I could better meet him in these moments. My mission now is to share this understanding wherever I can.

Challenging moments like these are common for those caring for someone living with dementia. Whether you are a family member or a professional carer, there is no instruction manual or single, reliable way to know what is best to say and do in every moment.

Many voices in the dementia community now encourage us to "listen differently" so we can "meet people where they are" and make care more effective.

But what does that actually mean in practice?

In a previous career I once had a coaching session with my manager that ended with the advice: "Do better." It was well intentioned, but it didn't tell me *how* to do better or *what* needed to change.

Being told to "listen differently" to people living with dementia can feel much the same. It sounds right, but without practical guidance it can leave carers feeling uncertain, ineffective, and alone in trying to work out what is happening in each moment.

This book shows what it means to “listen differently” and offers a human and practical way to apply this in moments of care.

S.P.A.C.E. has been shaped with the real world in mind. It is designed to be simple, portable, and usable in the moment, when understanding is needed quickly to guide a response.

The following pages introduce SPACE and explain how it can help carers notice the influences shaping a moment, and how to respond with greater understanding.

If you have ever wondered what to do when interaction becomes difficult, uncertain, or confusing, this book is for you.

Looking Differently - Why behaviour does not always tell the full story

When someone is living with dementia, what we see on the outside does not always clearly reflect what is happening on the inside.

Sometimes this can appear as subtle changes, such as withdrawal, restlessness, or unusually quiet for the individual. At other times it can be more intense; distress, agitation, anger, refusal, or behaviour that feels aggressive or unsafe.

These moments can be frightening or exhausting for carers, and when the cause is not clear it is easy to feel caught between reacting quickly and not knowing what to do next.

Their thoughts, feelings, discomfort, confusion, and needs may well still be present, but the usual pathways for communicating them have become less reliable.

What appears outwardly as confusing behaviour may be shaped by sensory discomfort, emotional atmosphere, or mental effort that is no longer visible to others. We often need to widen our attention to understand what the person may be trying to signal.

At the same time, many people gradually lose the ability to initiate activities for themselves. They may sit quietly for long periods, not because they no longer enjoy things, but because beginning something has become difficult if not impossible.

This way of understanding — that inner experience and outward expression do not always line up, and that surrounding influences may shape what becomes possible — is described more fully in our book “The Dementia Interface Lens”. You do not need to have read this to work with SPACE in practice.

The nature of dementia means we cannot always know exactly what someone is experiencing, and it is normal that our understanding will often be incomplete. Our aim is not perfect interpretation, but better orientation. When we can make thoughtful adjustments and observe what helps, moments of care may become easier for both the person living with dementia and the carer supporting them. In some situations the pathway between inner experience and outward communication can become temporarily clearer. Music is a common example. A person who struggles to express themselves verbally may still be able to sing a familiar song with enjoyment and fluency.

SPACE is designed as a practical way to pause and scan the situation in the moment of care.

This is where SPACE becomes useful.

What SPACE Is, and What It Is Not

SPACE is an interpretive framework for understanding situations in real time, not a model of the underlying condition.

The S.P.A.C.E. acronym offers a way to look more closely at the influences surrounding a person in that moment, helping us better understand what may be shaping their experience and adjust our response accordingly.

Before exploring the five domains, it helps to be clear about what SPACE is intended to do, and what it is not.

What SPACE Is

SPACE is a way of directing attention within uncertain situations. It provides a memorable structure for noticing aspects of the immediate situation that commonly shape how manageable, comfortable, or confusing a moment may feel for someone living with dementia.

By observing these influences more closely, we gain useful information about what may be

shaping the moment and where small adjustments might help.

What SPACE Is Not

SPACE is not a checklist or step-by-step procedure. Real situations rarely unfold in orderly ways, and attention needs to remain flexible.

It is not a diagnostic tool. It cannot identify causes with certainty or tell us exactly what someone is feeling, thinking, or intending.

It is not a method of controlling behaviour. Its purpose is not to stop behaviour or produce specific outcomes. Adjusting situational influences may sometimes reduce distress or make interaction easier, but this is not guaranteed and is not the primary aim. The aim is better understanding and more supportive conditions for connection.

SPACE does not remove uncertainty. Understanding may remain incomplete, and many influences on a person's experience cannot be directly observed. The framework helps us remain attentive and responsive even when we do not have full clarity.

How SPACE Fits Into Real Care

SPACE does not replace immediate practical action where safety or wellbeing is at risk. Care, protection, and professional judgement always take priority. SPACE works alongside these responses by helping us consider what may be contributing to the situation and how the environment or interaction might be adjusted to better support the person.

A Note on Aggression and Escalation

At times, distress may present as anger, raised voices, or behaviour that feels aggressive. These moments can be unsettling, and it is important to recognise that the safety of everyone involved must always come first. However, SPACE can still be used to pause and consider what might be shaping the moment.

During these moments, it can be helpful to recognise how strong the instinct to correct, explain, or resolve what is happening can be. Where it is safe to do so, gently setting aside that

need in the moment may help to settle the situation and reduce pressure for both of you.

Rather than focusing only on the behaviour itself, SPACE invites a wider view. Small adjustments to the environment, interaction, or expectations may sometimes reduce strain and make the situation more manageable.

This does not mean accepting unsafe behaviour, but recognising that escalation may be shaped by factors that are not immediately visible. When the pressure within the situation is reduced, the person may regain a greater sense of ease.

When SPACE Is Most Useful

SPACE can be particularly helpful when:

- behaviour does not clearly explain what is happening
- interaction becomes strained or confusing
- distress or withdrawal appears without obvious cause
- usual responses are not helping

- the person seems unable to initiate meaningful engagement
- the environment or expectations may be placing an unrecognised strain on them
- during marked increases in confusion and distress later in the day (sundowning)
- when they appear to be experiencing hallucinations

In these moments, examining the surrounding influences may guide more supportive responses.

SPACE organises these influences into five broad domains.

Each represents a major area of the immediate situation that can either support or strain a person's experience.

S – Senses

P – Physical

A – Atmosphere

C – Cognitive Changes

E – Engagement and Expectations

The following chapters introduce these domains and explain how they function as a practical observational framework that can be used directly in moments of care.

S – Senses

S – Senses
P – Physical
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E – Engagement and Expectations

S – Senses refers to the sensory world the person is living in.

This includes both:

- what is present around them, and
- how their senses can perceive and interpret their surroundings.

We might assume that if an environment seems comfortable or ordinary to us, it will feel the same to a person living with dementia. But sensory experience is uniquely personal and depends on how information is being received and processed in that moment. We can recognise this in our own lives, one day a crying child is simply background noise, while on another day the same sound becomes impossible to ignore.

For someone living with dementia, the same sound, light, touch, or movement may feel manageable one day and overwhelming the next, or even from one moment to another. Something we barely notice may be confusing, distressing, or even painful to them. They may misperceive shadows, reflections, or sounds, sometimes interpreting them as things that are not present.

Sometimes the difficulty is not too much stimulation, but too little. Long periods of inactivity can leave a person under-stimulated, restless, or disengaged.

As dementia progresses, the ability to initiate activities independently very often reduces. A person may want stimulation or companionship but be unable to begin something on their own. What appears to be passivity may sometimes be boredom that cannot be easily expressed.

The two parts of sensory experience

When considering S – Senses, it helps to look at two things.

1. The sensory environment

2. The person's sensory capacity

The sensory environment

- What stimulation is present?
- Noise, silence, or competing sounds
- Brightness, glare, shadows, visual clutter
- Movement around the person
- Smells
- Temperature of air on skin
- Textures of clothing or furniture
- Amount of activity in the space

Sometimes there is too much stimulation.
Sometimes there is too little.
Sometimes the stimulation can be uneven or unpredictable.
All these variables have the potential to affect a person's perception.

The person’s sensory capacity

How well are their senses working right now?

Dementia can change how sensory information is received and interpreted. These changes are not always obvious.

A person may experience:

- reduced or blurred vision
- difficulty judging distance or contrast
- sensitivity to glare or pattern
- difficulty filtering out background noise
- sounds feeling distorted or overwhelming
- increased or reduced sensitivity to touch
- slower sensory processing
- fluctuating tolerance depending on fatigue, stress, time of day, or overall effort

This means the same environment can feel very different from moment to moment.

What appears neutral to us may feel chaotic, confusing, or even boring to them.

What to look for

It is not necessary to analyse everything. These suggestions are not an exhaustive checklist to remember, but a guide to help you notice when their sensory world may not feel comfortable or manageable.

For example:

- covering ears or turning away from sound
- squinting, staring, or avoiding looking
- agitation in busy spaces
- withdrawal in visually busy environments
- distress involving touch, perhaps during personal care
- difficulty locating obvious objects

These responses may be signals, not resistance.

Changes to the sensory environment can help, but these are not simply responses to be made for a

person. They are adjustments that must be made with them.

Small environmental adjustments can make a significant difference once it becomes clear that something may be uncomfortable or difficult to process. This might involve reducing background noise, brightening the room to reduce shadows, or introducing an activity that provides more manageable stimulation.

Any change should be made with the person's agreement, expressed in whatever way they are able. This may be spoken, behavioural, or shown through comfort, relaxation, or willingness to engage. Living with dementia can make it harder to initiate a conversation about sensory discomfort, but consent and co-regulation remain central to supportive care.

What matters is not what the environment is like objectively, but how the person experiences it.

When sensory experience becomes easier, other difficulties may become easier too.

P – Physical

S – Senses
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E – Engagement and Expectations

P – Physical refers to the person's bodily experience and internal physical state.

This includes comfort, discomfort, effort, fatigue, and the many bodily needs that may not be easily expressed.

Physical experience is frequently less visible than we might assume. Consider how we constantly adjust our sitting position in response to minor discomfort somewhere in the body, sometimes so slight we barely register it. Now imagine not being able to relieve that discomfort or initiate a conversation to alert someone.

A person may appear settled, resistant, withdrawn, or distressed, while the underlying

influence is something happening within the body rather than in the environment or interaction.

Many physical sensations are difficult to describe, even for people without dementia. When communication becomes less reliable, discomfort may be shown through behaviour rather than explained in words.

Because of this, physical experience is a common and often overlooked influence on how a person responds to what is happening around them.

What physical experience includes

When considering P – Physical, it helps to recognise the range of bodily factors that can shape a person's moment-to-moment wellbeing.

These examples are not exhaustive:

- pain or physical discomfort
- fatigue or low energy
- hunger or thirst
- need for the toilet

- feeling too hot or too cold
- effects of medication
- illness or infection
- reduced mobility or physical strain
- difficulty maintaining posture or balance
- breathlessness or tension
- general bodily unease that cannot be easily identified

Some of these experiences are temporary. Some are ongoing. Many fluctuate across the day depending on activity, effort, health, and rest.

Even small physical discomforts can affect tolerance, attention, and emotional regulation. Comfort in the body does not become less important as communication changes.

As dementia progresses, the ability to initiate a conversation about a physical experience may reduce, but the experience itself does not.

- A person may not be able to explain pain, but they still feel it.

- They may not identify fatigue, but their capacity is reduced.

- They may not request comfort, but discomfort still shapes their behaviour.

When physical needs are unmet or unrecognised, the person may appear restless, agitated, withdrawn, resistant, or unusually quiet.

These responses may reflect bodily experience rather than emotional distress or deliberate behaviour.

What to look for

You do not need to identify the exact cause to notice that something may not feel right in their body.

Signs that physical experience may be shaping the moment can include:

- restlessness or repeated shifting position
- protecting or holding part of the body
- changes in posture or movement
- slower responses or reduced engagement
- sudden irritability or withdrawal
- facial tension or guarded expression
- increased confusion when tired
- resistance to movement or activity
- appearing more settled after rest, food, warmth, or comfort

These are not diagnostic clues. They are indications that the body may be asking for attention in a way that cannot easily be explained.

Physical comfort is not something we can simply manage for a person. It is something that needs to be supported in partnership with them.

Small adjustments can make a meaningful difference. This may involve changing position, offering rest, checking basic needs such as food or warmth, or reducing physical strain.

Any response should be guided by the person's signals and acceptance. Agreement may be spoken, behavioural, or shown through relaxation or willingness to engage. Even when communication is limited, comfort and discomfort can be expressed clearly through the body.

Supporting physical wellbeing is not separate from emotional or cognitive wellbeing. When the body feels safer or more comfortable, the person may have more capacity to engage and remain present.

The body is always part of the experience.

When something feels difficult to understand, it is worth considering whether the body is

comfortable enough to cope with what is being asked of it.

When physical comfort improves, other difficulties often become easier to carry.

A – Atmosphere

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A – Atmosphere refers to the emotional climate surrounding the person and the relational tone of what is happening around them.

It includes how people are feeling, how those feelings are expressed, and the overall sense of ease, tension, warmth, or urgency in the wider environment.

Atmosphere is not something we can see directly, but something we sense. It is communicated through voice, pace, facial expression, body language, and the unspoken signals people exchange. Over our lifetime, we become highly attuned to these shifts.

Most of us recognise this instinctively. We can enter a room and immediately sense whether it

feels calm, tense, welcoming, rushed, or uncomfortable, even before anyone speaks. Our bodies respond automatically, adjusting our level of alertness, ease, or caution.

Now imagine depending even more heavily on those signals while having less ability to interpret them or ask for reassurance when something feels unsettled.

A person may appear anxious, withdrawn, resistant, restless, or unusually quiet, when the emotional tone around them is placing strain on their sense of safety. This may vary between individuals, and even the same individual in different moments.

Atmosphere can strongly shape how supported or overwhelmed a person feels in any moment.

What atmosphere includes

When considering A – Atmosphere, it helps to recognise the range of emotional and relational signals present in an environment.

These may include:

- the emotional tone of people nearby
- facial expressions and body language
- pace of movement or interaction
- tension, frustration, or impatience
- warmth, reassurance, or steady presence
- conflicting emotional signals
- predictability or unpredictability of an interaction
- the overall sense of safety or unease

Atmosphere can shift quickly, particularly under stress, fatigue, time pressure, or uncertainty. Even subtle cues can influence how secure or unsettled a person feels.

Emotional signals do not need to be fully understood to have an effect.

As dementia progresses, interpreting emotional meaning may become more difficult, but sensitivity to emotional tone may remain.

- A person may not understand why someone feels rushed, but they can feel urgency.

- They may not recognise frustration, but they can sense tension.

- They may not follow a conversation, but they can respond to warmth.

When emotional signals are intense, mixed, or unpredictable, the person may experience unease without being able to explain why. This may lead to withdrawal, agitation, heightened alertness, or attempts to regain a sense of safety.

These responses may reflect the emotional climate rather than unwillingness or deliberate behaviour.

What to look for

You do not need to analyse emotional dynamics in detail. Simply notice when the surrounding atmosphere may not feel steady or supportive.

Signs that atmosphere may be shaping the moment can include:

- increased anxiety when the environment feels hurried

- withdrawal when voices become tense or sharp
- heightened alertness in unfamiliar or unpredictable situations
- settling when someone offers calm, steady presence
- changes in engagement depending on who is nearby
- mirroring of visible emotional states
- sudden shifts in behaviour without obvious physical or sensory cause

Atmosphere is not always within our control, but it is something we can notice and respond to.

Small relational shifts can make a meaningful difference. This may involve slowing pace, softening tone, offering reassurance, or simply remaining steady and predictable.

These are not techniques, but human ways of creating emotional safety together. The person's response may help to understand whether the changes made the atmosphere feel more manageable.

Emotional regulation is relational. Calm presence can support calm experience, while tension can quickly escalate an already unsettled atmosphere.

People do not only respond to what is said or done. They respond to how it feels to be with others.

When the emotional climate becomes steadier, other difficulties can become easier to carry.

C – Cognitive Changes

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C – Cognitive Changes refers to how the person is able to think, understand, process information, and make sense of what is happening around them.

This includes attention, memory, language, processing speed, and the ability to follow what is said or expected.

Activities that once felt effortless, such as reading or following television programmes, can become surprisingly difficult.

Reading requires sustained attention, tracking lines of text, and holding meaning in the mind. Television requires following rapid scene changes, background sounds, and shifting conversations.

When cognitive processing becomes slower or more effortful, these activities may no longer feel manageable, even if interest remains.

Cognitive capacity is not fixed for any of us. It shifts depending on fatigue, sensory load, emotional state, physical comfort, and the complexity of what is being asked.

Most of us recognise what it feels like when thinking becomes effortful. When we are tired, overwhelmed, or trying to process too much at once, it becomes harder to follow a conversation, make decisions, remember what we were doing, or respond quickly. Even simple tasks can feel confusing when too much information is coming in at once.

For a person living with dementia, this level of mental effort may be present much of the time. At the same time, their ability to explain the difficulty or ask for clarification or time to process may be reduced.

A person may appear confused, slow to respond, resistant, distracted, or disengaged, when the mental effort required to keep up with what is happening feels too great.

Cognitive demand can strongly shape how capable, confident, or overwhelmed a person feels in any moment. It can also affect the ability to initiate an activity.

A person will often still enjoy singing, listening to music, conversation, puzzles, or familiar tasks, but no longer be able to organise the steps needed to begin. Activities that carry their own rhythm or structure can sometimes remain accessible even after initiation becomes difficult. Familiar songs are a common example. A person may struggle to organise a conversation yet still join in with a song that guides participation through rhythm and familiarity.

Long periods of inactivity may occur unless someone else helps open the door to engagement.

What cognitive changes include

When considering C – Cognitive Changes, it helps to recognise the different ways thinking and understanding may be affected.

These may include:

- difficulty following conversations
- slower processing of information
- reduced ability to hold information in mind
- memory changes affecting recall of recent events
- difficulty understanding instructions or sequences
- trouble finding words or understanding language
- difficulty shifting attention between tasks
- becoming overwhelmed when too much is happening at once
- reduced ability to plan, organise, or make decisions
- changes in reasoning or interpretation

Some of these changes are consistent. Others might fluctuate depending on fatigue, stress, sensory load, emotional atmosphere, or physical comfort.

Even small increases in complexity can significantly increase mental effort.

Effort is not always visible

As dementia progresses, the effort required to understand or respond may well increase, even when this is not obvious to others.

A person may hesitate, withdraw, or refuse, not because they are unwilling, but because the thinking required feels too demanding.

- They may not be able to explain confusion, but they still experience it.
- They may not ask for more time, but they still need it.
- They may not understand instructions, but they may still sense expectation.

When cognitive demand exceeds what feels manageable, the person may stop responding, give an answer that seems unrelated, become frustrated, or withdraw from the situation emotionally or physically.

These responses might reflect mental overload rather than lack of cooperation.

What to look for

You do not need to measure cognitive ability to notice when something may feel too complex or demanding.

Signs that cognitive demand may be shaping the moment can include:

- slower responses or long pauses
- difficulty following conversation or instructions
- appearing overwhelmed

- repeated questions or losing track of what is happening
- giving answers that seem unrelated
- frustration when tasks involve multiple steps
- withdrawal when information is presented quickly
- increased confusion when tired, stressed, or overstimulated
- appearing more engaged when information is simpler or slower

These responses may indicate that the mental effort required is greater than the person can comfortably manage at that time.

The mental effort a person experiences cannot be removed, but it can be acknowledged and supported.

Small adjustments can make thinking feel more manageable. This may involve allowing more time,

reducing competing information, simplifying what is being asked, or presenting information in a steady and predictable way.

These are not techniques, but human ways of reducing unnecessary mental strain. The person's response can be a signal, if what is being asked feels manageable.

Mental processing is closely connected to sensory experience, physical comfort, and emotional atmosphere. When thinking becomes easier, engagement often becomes easier too. In these moments, activities that carry their own structure can become particularly accessible. Music and singing often provide this. A familiar song can guide participation through rhythm and memory, allowing the person to join in without needing to organise the interaction step by step.

Understanding takes effort

When something feels difficult to explain or respond to, it is worth considering whether the thinking required feels manageable in that moment.

When mental effort is reduced, other difficulties may become easier to carry.

E – Engagement and Expectations

S – Senses
P – Physical
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E – Engagement and Expectations refer to how the person is invited, included, guided, or expected to take part in what is happening around them.

It includes what is being asked, how that request is communicated, what role the person is expected to take, and how participation is understood in that moment.

Engagement is not simply whether a person takes part. It is shaped by how safe, meaningful, and manageable participation feels to them.

Most of us recognise how strongly expectations influence our willingness to engage. When we feel pressured, rushed, tested, or uncertain about

what is required, even simple tasks can feel difficult. When expectations feel supportive and flexible, we are more likely to participate.

Now imagine sensing that something is required without fully understanding what is being asked, why it matters, or how to succeed.

A person may appear uncooperative, passive, resistant, or uninterested, when the experience beneath that response is uncertainty or pressure.

Expectations can strongly shape whether engagement feels possible or overwhelming in any moment.

What engagement and expectations include

When considering E – Engagement and Expectations, it helps to recognise how participation is shaped by interaction.

This may include:

- how requests or invitations are communicated

- whether participation feels optional or required
- how clearly the person understands what is being asked
- whether expectations match the person's current capacity
- how success or failure is defined
- how hesitation or mistakes are responded to
- whether the activity feels meaningful or confusing
- how much pressure or urgency is present
- whether the person feels included or evaluated

Expectations are often communicated indirectly, through tone, pace, and body language. Even when words are not fully understood, the sense of expectation can often be felt.

As dementia progresses, understanding the structure or purpose of an activity may become more difficult, but sensitivity to expectation may still present. They may not know how to succeed, but they may still experience pressure or uncertainty about what is expected

When expectations feel unclear or beyond what feels manageable, the person may withdraw, resist, appear passive, or disengage.

These responses may reflect pressure or uncertainty rather than lack of interest.

What to look for

You do not need to analyse motivation to notice when expectations may be placing strain.

Signs can include:

- hesitation when something is requested
- withdrawal when expectations feel unclear
- resistance when an activity feels too demanding

- loss of confidence after correction or repeated prompting

- passive participation without clear involvement

These responses may indicate that participation does not feel safe, clear, or achievable in that moment.

Expectations cannot be removed from human interaction, but they can be shaped with care.

Small shifts in how participation is invited can make engagement feel more possible. This may involve clarifying what is being asked, reducing pressure, allowing flexibility, or responding to hesitation with patience rather than urgency.

These are not techniques, but ways to make participation feel safer and more meaningful. The person's response may show whether engagement feels manageable.

Engagement connects closely to sensory experience, physical comfort, emotional atmosphere, and cognitive effort. When

expectations feel supportive and proportionate, the person can have more capacity to take part.

As dementia progresses, engagement often becomes easier when activities are shared rather than expected to be initiated independently.

Sitting together with a puzzle, looking through photographs, singing together, listening to music, or participating in a simple creative activity can provide structure, stimulation, and connection at the same time.

These moments are not simply about completing an activity. They are ways of creating a shared experience that supports orientation, comfort, and relationship.

Participation is not only about what a person can do. It is also about how safe, clear, and meaningful the invitation feels.

When expectations become more manageable, engagement may become easier too.

How the SPACE domains work together

S – Senses
P – Physical
A – Atmosphere
C – Cognitive Changes
E – Engagement and Expectations

In any given moment, all experience is shaped by multiple influences.

In our own lives we know these do not occur in isolation. They overlap, interact, and shift over time. A change in one area often affects several others.

- A noisy environment may increase mental effort.
- Physical discomfort may reduce tolerance for stimulation.
- Emotional tension may make expectations feel harder to manage.

- Unclear expectations may increase anxiety or fatigue.

When supporting a person living with dementia, what we observe is rarely the result of a single cause. It is usually the combined effect of several influences interacting at once.

Because of this, SPACE is not designed to identify *the* reason something is happening but helps widen attention to the range of factors shaping what feels possible.

Understanding will always be partial. What matters is broadening awareness.

You do not need to consider everything at once

When first encountering the five domains, it may seem that all must be examined whenever something feels unclear.

This is not the intention.

When using SPACE one aspect might stand out more than the others, and that is simply where attention can begin.

- You might notice that the environment feels busy.
- You might sense physical discomfort.
- You might feel tension in the room.
- You might see signs of mental effort.
- You might recognise that expectations feel unclear or demanding.

Any one of these can be a starting point.

SPACE is not a checklist to complete. It is a way of widening awareness beyond what is immediately visible.

Small changes influence the whole

Because the domains are interconnected, even small adjustments can shift the overall experience.

- Reducing background noise may make thinking easier.
- Adjusting posture may reduce distress.
- Slowing pace may ease emotional tension.
- Clarifying expectations may restore confidence.

A change often comes not from solving everything, but from easing one part of the situation enough for the whole to feel more manageable.

Observation and response form a cycle

Using SPACE is an ongoing process of noticing, adjusting, and observing again. It begins with a simple pause and a quiet question:

What might be shaping this moment for the person right now?

From there, attention naturally widens and small adjustments become possible.

1. Something feels unsettled.
2. We consider what might be influencing the moment.
3. We make a small adjustment.
4. We observe what changes.

If the situation becomes easier, that is useful information. If it does not, our attention remains open to other possibilities.

Over time this way of observing can become more intuitive. Attention moves more fluidly between what is happening and what might help.

The aim is understanding, not control

SPACE does not offer control over outcomes. Human experience is too complex for that, and seeking control over another person is not the aim of compassionate support.

Its purpose is to support a fuller understanding of the moment, so responses can be more attuned, flexible, and humane.

When conditions become easier to tolerate or understand, the person may have more capacity to engage or remain present. This is not guaranteed, and it is not the aim of the approach. The purpose is simply to reduce pressure and make the moment more manageable.

The value of SPACE lies in improved ability to respond to experiences and encounters with those living with dementia, not in achieving a particular result.

The domains support one another

Each domain highlights a different aspect of experience.

S – Senses directs attention to the sensory world.

P – Physical brings awareness to bodily experience.

A – Atmosphere highlights the emotional and relational climate.

C – Cognitive Changes focuses on mental effort.

E – Engagement and Expectations consider how participation is shaped.

No one domain is more important than another. Together they offer a fuller picture of what may be influencing the moment.

A flexible way of seeing

With time, SPACE can become less something we actively apply, and more a way of seeing situations as they unfold.

- Instead of asking what is wrong, attention turns toward what may be shaping the moment.
- Instead of focusing only on behaviour, awareness expands to include environment, body, emotion, thinking, and interaction.
- Instead of searching for a single cause, there is openness to multiple influences.

This shift in attention may change how we respond. When we see context more clearly, responding becomes more natural, and the person is more likely to feel supported in the moment they are living.

It might also be helpful to look back at those moments we have already experienced and consider how the SPACE domains might help us understand them differently.

Revisiting a moment

Earlier in this book I described a moment when my father repeatedly asked to “go home”, even though he was already sitting in his own home. In fact, this happened many times. He would ask to “go home”.

At the time I did not understand what was happening and understandably I tried to correct him. But explaining that we were already home, and that there was nowhere else we needed to go, seemed only to create confusion and distress. Each conversation became circular and frustrating for both of us.

Even then I sensed that something other than a request to go home was being expressed. However, I didn’t have the language or understanding to recognise what it might be at the time.

Looking back at these moments now, through the understanding that SPACE offers, I can see how those moments might have been shaped by influences I would never have considered at the time.

Even in the home he had lived in for many years, small changes in lighting, noise, or visual cues could have altered how he was perceiving the space. (**S**)

How he was feeling physically, perhaps fatigue or discomfort, might have reduced his ability to tolerate uncertainty or confusion, prompting the wish to go home. (**P**)

The atmosphere between us may have shifted as I tried to correct him. Few people enjoy being corrected, and I'm sure this affected us both. (**A**)

Cognitively he simply might not have understood my words in that moment, or being told that he was already home may not have resolved the feeling he was trying to express, especially if that wasn't exactly what he meant. (**C**)

He might have felt dismissed and disengaged by my expectation that he should accept my explanation and stop asking the question. (**E**)

From his perspective, asking to go "home" may not have referred to a physical place at all. When people feel overwhelmed, it is natural to want to leave a situation and return somewhere that feels

safe or familiar. We see this instinct in children, teenagers, and adults. Yet when someone living with dementia expresses the same wish, we can assume the words must be mistaken rather than meaningful.

What happened for my dad and me was that I began to notice he often wanted to go home when he was bored, or when a conversation had become fast-moving and difficult for him to follow.

Those early moments of understanding were the beginning of the deeper understanding shared in this book. Instead of hearing a mistaken statement that needed correcting, I gradually began to recognise that something meaningful was being communicated, even if the words and actions themselves were not precise.

Over time we began to approach our visits differently. Instead of relying mainly on spontaneous conversation, we planned our time together and made sure it included things we could do with him. We focused our attention on him and on helping him remain engaged in the moment with us.

When we did this, the requests to go home reduced dramatically, and our time together became more relaxed and enjoyable for all of us.

Positive experiences like this eventually guided us to design the dementia activities we later developed through Timeless Presents. Our activities are designed to help create the kind of environment where engagement and connection can emerge more easily.

Everything we do, the activities we design, our book “The Dementia Interface Lens”, and our dementia advocacy all grew from the same question:

How can we support connection and engagement when communication can no longer be relied upon in the usual ways?

SPACE is the next step in that same journey, helping us look more carefully at the wider influences shaping the experience in any given moment.

Looking back, I know how useful something like SPACE would have been to me in those earlier moments. It offers a way to look beyond what we can immediately see and to step into the person’s

experience and consider what they may be trying to express.

When we begin to see moments in this way, new possibilities for connection often emerge.

Respecting Humanity

Throughout this book, attention has been redirected, not towards techniques, managing behaviour or finding correct explanations. Instead, it is directed towards the influences that shape experience, and towards the person experiencing them.

When someone lives with dementia, what is visible to others may change. Communication may become uncertain. Behaviour may seem unfamiliar or difficult to interpret. Moments that once felt simple may become complex or unclear.

In the face of this uncertainty, it can be tempting to narrow our focus. To look only at what is happening outwardly. To respond quickly. To correct, manage, or resolve.

But human experience does not disappear just because it becomes harder to express.

The sensory world is still felt.
The body still experiences comfort and discomfort.
Emotional atmosphere is still sensed.
Mental effort is still taking place.
A person remains within all of this, living each moment from the inside.

SPACE exists to help us remember, and when our attention widens, something subtle but important can shift. Behaviour is no longer the whole point. It becomes a signal.

Context becomes visible, uncertainty becomes more tolerable and responses become more flexible.

It becomes easier to remain alongside the person, rather than ahead of or against them.

However, it cannot remove all difficulty. Some moments will still feel confusing, strained, or painful. Understanding will always be partial. There will be times when nothing seems to help, and times when change arrives unexpectedly from something very small.

But when we hold awareness of the wider influences shaping experience, we are less likely to mistake distress for defiance, withdrawal for indifference, or confusion for absence.

Not because everything becomes easy, but because the person is no longer reduced to what is visible on the surface.

They can be understood as someone still experiencing, still responding, still living each moment as fully as circumstances allow.

In the end, SPACE does not ask us to do more. It asks us to see more.

And when we see more clearly, we are better able to remain with the person in the moment they are living, not the moment we expect, remember, or wish for, but the one that is actually here now.

Information

Alongside this book, we are co-founders of Timeless Presents, a UK-based social enterprise creating dementia-inclusive activities designed to support insight, engagement, and connection in later-stage care. Our products are grounded in the same thinking described in this book and are used by families, care homes, hospitals, and health services to create conditions where connection can still emerge, without relying on memory, instruction, or correction.

For readers who are interested in seeing how these ideas translate into practical tools, you can find more information about our work at: www.timelesspresents.com

This book was written by the authors, drawing on lived experience, professional practice, and original thinking. Artificial intelligence tools were used at points as a supportive aid for structuring, clarifying language, and refining drafts. All ideas, interpretations, and conclusions are the authors' own, and responsibility for the final content rests entirely with them.