

# Mum's dementia changed my life

*Loving son James Ashwell, 35, didn't know anything about dementia when his mum Fay was first diagnosed. Here he tells the story of his family's journey and how caring for his mum gave him a passion to help others*



As told to Kate Corr

I was 18 years old when I realised Mum was acting a bit weird. She'd always been a vibrant, kind and happy person with a busy, organised life. Now she seemed increasingly distant, disorganised and sad. Once, I came home from school and found her crying; "I don't know what's wrong with me, I've got nothing to be depressed about" she said, quickly brushing it off.

Mum was diagnosed with early onset dementia in 2003, aged 59, but my three siblings and I had all left home by then and Dad didn't tell us. He and Mum were a good team and would probably have continued to

hide the true extent of her condition for a long time. But then on January 17, 2006 I received a phone call at work from a neighbour saying that Dad had died suddenly - and that's when everything changed.

I was 25 years old and losing Dad out of the blue was harrowing, but there was no time to grieve because, without him by her side, it was plain Mum's condition had worsened considerably. Friends told me they'd find her sitting in the dark living room just waiting for Dad to come

home from work, which was so upsetting - how many hours and days had she spent alone?

I never wanted her to be alone again so I gave up my job in London and moved back home to Birmingham to be with her. But I was a gung-ho 25 year-old, and didn't have a clue what caring for a mum with dementia might entail.

The first time I took her to see the doctor, I was falling apart. I had a thousand questions, including 'is she going to die?' and only five minutes of allotted

time to ask them. I felt so overwhelmed that I burst into tears.

Luckily my brother Mark moved back home too, so at least we had each other. But those first few months were hell, especially when Mum woke constantly during the night. I remember tying a string to her bedroom door and putting it on my finger so I'd know if she was out of bed.

Mark and I did what most carers end up doing: we muddled through. We soon realised that if Mum wasn't to sit watching TV all

day we had to find new ways to keep her busy and try to focus on what she could still do, rather than what she couldn't do.

Gradually we found activities that brought her pleasure. She enjoyed jigsaws but it was upsetting to see her with ones designed for children so Mark made some himself using laminated family photos and velcro. My sister Gemma took her to jewellery-making classes and Mum started making necklaces at home. She was a trained chef and I was keen to help her continue cooking without hurting herself so I called up the manager of a chicken factory and asked if we could buy a pair of cut-resistant gloves for her to wear. He kindly sent us several pairs free.

Of course there were bad days when nothing helped and the stress got to us all - Mark and I had a physical fight once and punched each other. But the moments of joy, when Mum laughed or grew excited about something, were absolutely precious. What we all

wanted, more than anything, was to see Mum's face light up the way it used to. I suppose we were looking for ways to bring her back to us, however briefly...

We couldn't stop the illness, though. Mum continued to decline steadily. She died peacefully aged only 67, on February 17 2011, the day after my 30th birthday.

Although devastating, the experience of caring for Mum changed my life and

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gave me a passion I never knew I possessed. I founded [www.unforgettable.org](http://www.unforgettable.org) to share what I've learnt and to make dementia-friendly products (like the ones we discovered) easily available to everyone.

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Above: James with sister Gemma and mum Fay. Left: Fay still enjoying a birthday cake!

## DEMENTIA PRODUCTS

James has sourced thousands of products to help make life easier for people with dementia and their carers and most are exempt of VAT for those with the condition. Below are just a few of his favourites:

### Jigsaw

Whether it's colouring or making jewellery, activities that make a person with dementia feel productive can also boost their confidence and mood. This 13-piece jigsaw is durable and specially designed to stimulate conversation and reminiscence. **Price £12.99**



### Key fobs

These nifty key fobs are brightly coloured and a great way to help people in the early stages of dementia to remember which key is which. This in turn, can help them to stay independent. **Price £4.20**

### Cut-resistant gloves

These extra-tough gloves can enable keen cooks, like Mum, to continue enjoying their hobby safely. Looking back, I'd say the gloves we found for mum allowed her to carry on cooking for another three years - that's a long time. **Price £5.99**



### Bedi shield

Brushing Mum's teeth was a nightmare, she didn't like it at all



and would keep her mouth closed. This simple device, designed by former Chief Dental Officer for England, Professor Raman Bedi, gently helps to keep the mouth open to ease the process. **Price: £6.99**

### Tracking technology

There's much debate around the ethical issues of using tracking devices for dementia, but such technology has the potential to ease worry. GPS shoe insoles have an in-built tracking device that enables carers to keep loved ones safe if they go out alone. **Price £286.80**



### Dementia Clock

Widely available, this clock displays a simplified face with the time of day as well as the day and date which can really ease confusion. **Price £63.99**

### Eating set

Mum really struggled to feed herself. The bowl and spoon is angled to make scooping up food easier and the blue colour helps food stand out. The cup has a sturdy base to prevent spills. **Price £40.19**



For more advice, or to order products, call 020 3322 9070, or visit [www.unforgettable.org](http://www.unforgettable.org)