

Traveling together when memory loss is part of the journey

By Julie Pfab, Director of Community Services

Once spring arrives, I start thinking about summer travel. At different stages of life, travel takes many forms through various circumstances. For those who have always enjoyed traveling, a dementia diagnosis may cause some hesitation. Yet with thoughtful planning and realistic expectations, travel does not necessarily have to stop. The focus just might have to shift from schedules and sightseeing to prioritizing comfort, safety, and emotional well-being.

When someone is living with memory loss, all travel can feel overwhelming, but flying carries extra burdens. Loud and hectic environments like airports can be challenging. Recognizing this, many caregivers are learning that slowing the pace, simplifying plans, and leaning into available supports can ease stress for everyone involved.

One tool that has made a meaningful difference for many families is the [Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program](#). The sunflower—worn as a lanyard, pin, or wristband—quietly signals that a traveler may need extra time, patience, or assistance. It does not disclose a diagnosis or request special treatment; instead, it gently invites understanding. Contact information can be included if you desire.

Rick and Joan McCormick, participants with Lyngblomsten Community Services, have successfully used sunflower lanyards when navigating recent air travel. They received extra time when boarding their flight, and when Rick and Joan became separated, an attendant was able to contact Rick and let him know Joan's location while he waited with her. For extra peace of mind, Rick suggested attaching a Bluetooth tracker like an Apple AirTag to the lanyard in case of separation.

At Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport, the Sunflower Program is part of [a broader commitment to becoming dementia-friendly](#). Staff and volunteers are trained to recognize hidden disabilities and respond with calm communication, clearer instructions, and additional support when needed. For caregivers, this can reduce the burden of repeatedly explaining a loved one's needs during stressful moments.

The [Roseville Alzheimer's & Dementia Community Action Team \(RSVL A/D\)](#), one of Lyngblomsten's community partners, has played a key role in improving dementia-friendly travel through training and resources.

For caregivers planning travel, preparation remains essential. Familiar routines, favorite comfort items, allowing extra time, and maintaining flexibility can make a significant difference. Equally important is caring for oneself—acknowledging when rest is needed and accepting help when it's available.

You may consider checking out a [Memory Minder Kit from the Ramsey County Library](#) at the Roseville and Shoreview branches. These kits are available for three-week lending periods and contain materials used to spark memories, conversations, and engaging interactions. Kits can be useful during travel or when you arrive at your destination.

A successful trip may look different than it once did. It may be shorter, slower, or simpler. But success isn't measured by miles traveled—it's measured by moments of connection and shared experience. With growing dementia-friendly practices in our communities, travel can continue to be part of life's journey.

To learn more about traveling with dementia, check out the list of tips from the Alzheimer's Association: <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/safety/traveling>.