

## **What to do if your spouse is showing signs of mental decline**

If your spouse has always managed the household finances, now is the time to step in. Dementia doesn't strike overnight – it's a gradual decline. The earlier you understand the financial setup, the smoother the transition will be. By [Kenny Meiring](#) 14 Aug 2025\_ Dementia is overwhelming and navigating the financial side while managing the emotional toll can feel impossible alone.

**Question:** My husband is showing signs of mental confusion and I am concerned that he may be getting dementia. What do I need to do in order to manage his finances?

**Answer:** With people living longer, it's increasingly common for a spouse to experience a cognitive decline. This can dramatically impact day-to-day routines, relationships and finances.

If your partner starts showing signs of mental decline, it's essential to act early. The steps you take now – while your partner is still lucid – can prevent years of legal and financial complications later. Here are the seven key actions you should take:

### **1. Understand the power of attorney trap**

Most people assume that a power of attorney (POA) solves the problem. However, a standard POA only works while the person granting it is mentally competent.

Once a medical professional declares your spouse mentally incapable, the POA becomes invalid. At that point, managing their finances can only be done by applying to court to appoint a curator or administrator – a time-consuming and expensive process.

### **2. Take control of the finances now**

If your spouse has always managed the household finances, now is the time to step in. Dementia doesn't strike overnight – it's a gradual decline. The earlier you understand the financial setup, the smoother the transition will be.

Start with a financial fire drill:

- List every bank account, investment, debit order and monthly expense.
- Make sure you know where money comes from and where it goes.
- Locate key documents such as wills, marriage certificates, trust deeds and insurance policies.
- Once you've gathered these documents, create a financial mind map that outlines your entire financial ecosystem. This can guide you – or a trusted person – if your spouse becomes unable to explain things.

### **3. Get legal documents in order**

Legal paperwork must be signed while the person is still competent.

Make sure you review and update your wills, and check beneficiary nominations on life policies and retirement funds. If a trust might be needed, consult a professional now. Store all your documents in a safe but accessible place.

### **4. Get a medical sign-off on major decisions**

If your spouse still appears mentally capable, it's vital to protect any decisions they make by getting a medical sign-off.

Before making legal or financial changes, have a doctor like your family GP or neurologist confirm that your spouse was of sound mind at the time of signing. This helps defend those decisions from future challenges – whether from family members, banks or the Master of the High Court.

### **5. Plan for the 'what if I die first' scenario**

Many spouses overlook the possibility of them passing away before their cognitively impaired partner. You need to ensure they're protected if you're no longer around. This includes:

- Deciding who will care for them – family, professionals or a facility;
- Including a special trust in your will to manage any assets left to them; and
- Appointing a trusted trustee to manage their affairs in their best interest.

Without this planning, your spouse may be left vulnerable or placed under expensive court oversight.

### **6. Have the conversation early – and repeat it**

Talking about dementia and money is difficult, but it's a conversation you can't postpone. Have the talk while your spouse can still participate meaningfully – and revisit it as the situation evolves.

### **7. Get the right support**

Dementia is overwhelming and navigating the financial side while managing the emotional toll can feel impossible alone.

I would recommend that you:

- Engage a certified financial planner to help you structure your finances and trusts correctly;
- Consult an attorney who specialises in mental incapacity planning; and
- Join a support group or online community for spouses of dementia patients.

Facing the possibility of dementia in a spouse is challenging. The instinct is to focus on the medical side, but ignoring the financial implications can create chaos down the line. If you're starting to see the signs, don't wait. The earlier you put these structures in place, the more peace of mind you will have – and the better protected your spouse will be in the years ahead. **DM**

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