

Tips for Caring for Someone With Dementia

by Joyce Clark, CEO of Achievis Senior Living

According to the Oklahoma Alzheimer's Association, about 5.4 million people in the U.S. are living with Alzheimer's disease. At least 800,000 of those people live alone. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, which is a general term used to describe a decline in cognitive functioning. In addition to serious memory problems, dementia sufferers can have changes in personality, difficulty with social functioning, and impaired judgment and thinking. An early diagnosis may help individuals get the maximum benefit from available treatments. There are a number of warning signs that indicate the onset of Alzheimer's:

- Asking the same question repeatedly
- Forgetting something recently learned
- Losing track of seasons, dates, and passage of time
- Forgetting where one is or how one got there
- Trouble judging distance or determining color
- Problems working with numbers or following a plan
- Difficulty completing daily tasks
- Trouble driving to once-familiar places
- Accusing others of stealing
- Difficulty finding the right word
- Wearing inappropriate clothes for weather
- Giving large amounts of money to telemarketers

At some point a person with dementia needs a caregiver. The role of a caregiver is diverse and can include guardian, cook, nurse, maid, safety officer, behavior manager, CFO, liaison with doctors and others, social worker, and activity director. At least 70% of caregivers are women. Some are also employed and may also care for children. Frequently, dementia caregivers decline faster than the person they are protecting. When compared to other caregivers, people taking care of a loved one with dementia are twice as likely to have physical or psychological problems. They are at a much higher risk of social isolation and financial distress and tend to skip taking care of themselves. Dementia caregivers are more than twice as likely to use medications for mood and nerves. It can be an overwhelming job as each day brings new challenges. Outlined below are some helpful tips from the National Institute on Aging to deal with stressful situations and difficult behaviors. Each person with Alzheimer's is unique and some of these tips will work, while others may not.

COMMUNICATION

- Choose simple words & short sentences. Use a gentle, calm voice.
- Minimize distractions & noise.
- Make eye contact & call the person by name.
- Allow enough time for a response & don't interrupt.
- If the person is struggling to find a word or express a thought, gently try to provide the word.

BATHING

- Plan the bath / shower for when the person is most calm & agreeable. Be consistent. Try to develop a routine.
- Respect fact that bathing is scary & uncomfortable for some people.
- Tell the person what you are going to do, step by step, & allow him to do as much as possible.
- Prepare in advance. Make sure you have everything ready. Draw the bath ahead of time.
- Be sensitive to the temperature. Warm up the room beforehand if necessary & keep a robe nearby. Test the water temperature before beginning.
- Minimize safety risks by using a handheld shower head, shower bench, grab bars, & nonskid bath mats.
- A sponge bath can be effective between showers or baths.

DRESSING

- Try to have the person get dressed at the same time each day so it is a daily routine.
- Encourage the person to dress himself to whatever degree possible.
- Allow the person to choose from a limited selection of outfits. If she has a favorite outfit, consider buying several identical sets.
- Store some clothes in another room to reduce choices. Only keep 2 - 3 outfits in the closet or dresser.
- Arrange the clothes in the order they are to be put on to help the person move through the process.
- Hand the person one item at a time or give clear, step-by-step instructions.
- Choose clothing that is comfortable, easy to get on & off, & easy to care for. Elastic waists & velcro closures minimize struggles.

INCONTINENCE

- Have a routine for taking the person to the bathroom. For example, take her to the bathroom every 3 hours. Don't wait for the person to ask.
- Watch for signs that the person may have to go to the bathroom, such as restlessness or pulling at clothes. Respond quickly.
- Be understanding when accidents occur. Stay calm & reassure the person if he is upset. Try to keep track of when accidents happen to plan ways to avoid them.
- To help prevent nighttime accidents, limit certain types of fluids, such as caffeine, in the evening.
- If you are going out with the person, plan ahead. Know where restrooms are located, & have the person wear simple, easy-to-remove clothing. Take an extra set of clothing along in case of an accident.

HALLUCINATIONS & DELUSIONS

- Avoid arguing with the person about what she sees or hears. Try to respond to the feelings expressed.
- Try to distract the person to another topic or activity. Try moving to another room or going outside for a walk.
- Turn off the television set when violent or disturbing programs are on.
- Discuss with the doctor any illness the person has had or medicines he is taking.

WANDERING

- Make sure that they carry some kind of identification or wears a medical bracelet.
- Notify neighbors that the person has a tendency to wander.
- Keep a recent photograph to assist police if the person becomes lost.
- Keep doors locked. Consider a keyed deadbolt or an additional lock high or low on the door.
- Install an "announcing system" that chimes when the door opens.

VISITING THE DOCTOR

- Try to schedule the appointment for the person's best time of day. Also, ask office staff what time of day is least crowded & ask for their help to make the visit go smoothly.
- Don't tell the person about the appointment until the day of the visit or even shortly before time to go. Be positive & matter-of-fact.
- Bring along something for the person to eat & drink & any enjoyable magazines or activities.
- Take a brief summary listing the person's medical history, primary care doctor, & current medications.

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