

Taking Care!

Strategies To Help With Alzheimer's Caregiving

By Lisa M. Petsche – lmepetsche@gmail.com

A diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease (AD) is devastating for both the affected person and those close to them. A variety of emotions are experienced by the diagnosed person, including denial, anxiety, fear, anger and resentment, embarrassment, loneliness, sadness and despair.

Family members provide most of the care that people with AD require. Like their loved one, these informal caregivers experience a wide variety of distressing feelings. They're at risk for burnout due to the physical, mental and emotional toll of caregiving.



Lisa
Petsche

It's common to feel that no one understands what they and their relative are going through. Even if friends and relatives have a good understanding of the disease, they may withdraw out of discomfort, fear or a sense of helplessness. Caregivers become further isolated because they can't leave the affected person alone and therefore don't get out much.

~ Caregiving Tips ~

If you are a caregiver, you may find the following tips helpful in looking after your relative.

To maximize their independence, simplify tasks and break them down into manageable steps, communicating them one at a time. Repetition may be needed, and demonstration can be helpful.

Use a low-pitched voice to convey calmness and reassurance. Keep words simple and sentences short. Also keep questions to a minimum and try to avoid open-ended ones, especially those that begin with "Why" or "How." Offer limited choices (for example, "Would you like coffee or juice?") to allow your relative some control without overwhelming them.

Buy clothing that's easy to put on and can be mixed and matched. If your relative is prone to layering clothes, limit access by storing only a few items at a time in their dresser or closet, and keep the rest in another location.

When self-feeding becomes difficult, try adaptive utensils, plates and drinking cups – found in medical supply stores – and use finger foods as much as possible. If spills are frequent, stick to easy-care clothing and purchase extra tops and pants. If money is tight, shop at second-hand stores. You may find it helpful to use an adult bib or apron, ensuring coverage of the torso and lap. Don't serve hot foods or beverages until they've cooled down enough that they won't burn you or your relative should an accident occur. Since people with dementia are easily distracted and confused, clear off the table and offer one item at a time.

If your relative is prone to wandering, consider getting extra locks on exterior doors, or have door alarms installed. You might also register them with MedicAlert's Safe and Found program. For more information, call 1-800-432-5378 or go online to www.medicalert.org/our-partners/alz/.

Keep in mind that social situations involving more than a few people tend to be over-stimulating and are best avoided. Otherwise, keep your relative in a separate room, with accompaniment, and have people come in to socialize with him or her one or two at a time. It's preferable to entertain at home rather than take the person with Alzheimer's out to an unfamiliar environment to visit with others. If you'd like to accept an invitation, arrange for a friend or relative to stay with the person so you can go solo and have a stress-free time.

Accept that it's impossible to reason with someone who has dementia. When your relative is fixated on a certain idea or activity, try distraction instead of confrontation.

Use humor to deflect a tense situation.

Learn to recognize early signs of escalating behavior and be prepared with some calming strategies to head it off – for example, putting on music or serving a favorite snack.

Lisa M. Petsche is a social worker and freelance writer specializing in boomer and senior health matters. She has personal experience with dementia care.



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