

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE (AD)

CAREGIVING CHALLENGES

Some of the specific things that are challenging for patients with AD usually stem from the memory problems that are so predominant in this disease. The lack of memory for events or people can make the individual extremely anxious about daily life. This can be exhibited with asking questions and repeating information, preparing for appointments/day care well ahead of time, and use of notes and reminders endlessly. Apathy or a lack of initiative can be due to tasks that used to seem routine now being overwhelming. For example, the person who always enjoyed puzzles but no longer does them because they are too overwhelming and require skills he/she no longer possesses. Finally, agitation can occur often as people become less able to interpret the environment and control or express their feelings. This can be seen in people with dementia who may strike out when people are caring for them. These behaviors are very difficult for caregivers who are trying to provide care and understand the changes in their loved one.

STRATEGIES FOR COPING

The major strategy for coping is to keep the goal in mind. Often, caregivers trying to make everything all right, will end up exhausted and frustrated. The truth is they can't make everything all right and an adjustment of goals to be realistic and attainable may be helpful. Perhaps the goal is to be sure the patient is clean, comfortable and well fed and realizing that success might be 80%. Being comfortable with a less than perfectly groomed spouse or perfectly organized home is bound to be a difficult task but accepting this will allow you to perhaps enjoy time you might otherwise have spent fretting about hygiene issues.

Anticipate misinterpretation by the individual with dementia. They are often no longer able to accurately interpret verbal or non-verbal cues which can result in anxiety and frustration in both the individual and the caregiver. Try to be clear and concise in your communications – repeating things as needed using the same words or message. Reduce extraneous noise and distractions when trying to communicate. Do not use confusing pronouns (he, she, it) but rather names and specific titles. Try to imagine what someone MIGHT think you are trying to do or say if they were unable to think clearly.

Remember that all behavior has a purpose. Many experts believe that some of the behavioral symptoms that people with dementia exhibit such as shouting out or striking out are meaningful. Although the person does not generally intend to disrupt things or to hurt someone, they do intend to be noticed and perhaps communicate a need that is not being met. In addition, it is important to remember that while these behaviors are meaningful, they are not intentional and the individual is not doing this “on purpose” but more likely in an attempt to convey a message that they can longer explain in words. Slowing down, trying to see the world thru their eyes and trying to respond to the “feeling” behind the behavior rather than the behavior itself, may allow you to prevent an emotional crisis.

Many people with Alzheimer's disease remain physically fit and retain their ability to be comfortable and involved in social situations quite late in the disease. Therefore, **enjoy the good times** and continue to socialize, travel, be physically active and participate in activities that are enjoyable to both the person with Alzheimer's and the caregiver. Often, familiar activities that may be well memorized will continue to be enjoyable for the

