

8 WAYS TO CARE FOR SENIORS WITH DEMENTIA AND ALZHEIMER'S



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If your aging parent is showing signs of dementia, you may wonder what the future holds and what to expect as the disease progresses. Whether you are providing support or plan to assist with caregiving in the future, understanding the progression of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia is important for ensuring that your parent receives the highest quality of care.

Coping with dementia can be frightening and upsetting, but you should understand that maintaining your optimism is vital as you continue to enjoy time with your parent. In addition, keeping a hopeful attitude can help make each day meaningful for your loved one with dementia.

How can joyful, compassionate caregiving keep seniors who are suffering from Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia engaged with life? By incorporating the following eight guidelines into your caregiving, you can help your loved one with dementia remain engaged and enjoying a vibrant life.

Providing Nourishing Food in an Enjoyable Atmosphere

Meals constitute an important component of your parent's day, and they should be pleasant and nourishing. To create mealtimes that support a vibrant life for your parent, consider:





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- Limiting distractions to keep the environment quiet, serene and calm. Turn off any TVs or anything else making noise so your parent can focus on the food and company.
- Using tools like lids and straws to make the physical act of eating easier. Finger foods work well if your parent has trouble with utensils, especially knives. Bowls can work better than plates for keeping food in place and easy to pick up.
- Serving small portions for meals and snacks, since your parent with dementia may have a limit to her attention span and appetite. To make up for the lower calorie density of small meals, you can serve your parent snacks more frequently throughout the day.
- If you're working with an outside care provider, choose someone who will be patient with your parent and allow her the time she needs to enjoy her meals.



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Following a Schedule

A common symptom of Alzheimer's is the loss of memory function, including forgetting information that was learned very recently. Some patients begin forgetting important events or dates and may ask you to repeat the same information multiple times.

Sticking to routines as much as is feasible can help both the dementia patient and the caregiver. Consider reviewing activities that occur on a daily or weekly basis and incorporating them into a schedule. Being reminded of what comes next can be extremely calming and soothing for a senior who is suffering the effects of dementia. If your parent seems less confused or more cooperative at certain times of day, schedule most activities during those times.

Pay special attention to handling medical appointments, since these tend to occur frequently for dementia patients and are not easy to reschedule at the last minute if your parent has a bad day. Check with medical office personnel to find out what time of day is least crowded, and schedule within that time window. In addition, don't tell your loved one about the appointment too far in advance, as it may cause unnecessary anxiety; instead, wait to share the information until the day of the visit.

Speak positively about appointments, and consider bringing an activity such as a book or puzzle that your parent enjoys. In addition, having another friend or family member come with you can help alleviate stress and allow you to speak with medical professionals privately.



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Being Aware of Limitations

Effective care springs from compassion, empathy and understanding. While most dementia patients experience memory loss, symptoms can go much further, depending on the specific areas of the brain the disease affects. In many cases, dementia reveals itself as personality changes instead of or in addition to memory loss.

Individuals suffering from dementia may become confused about who they are, where they are or the current time period. Moods and behaviour may become troublesome, and patients can become hostile and combative. Patients may begin using inappropriate language or become paranoid that loved ones are persecuting them.

In later stages of dementia, patients may be unable to care for themselves on a daily basis and may need help with basic activities like using the toilet and bathing. They may stop communicating and, eventually, fail to recognize family members.

It's critical that a compassionate caregiver recognize the various ways in which dementia can manifest and treat the patient with empathy and compassion. Understanding that your parent may change in many ways and that she will not be able to participate in some activities is vital.

As dementia progresses, patients often become frail and develop mobility problems that preclude them from participating in activities outdoors. The National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners notes that



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Exploring Nature

involvement with nature can provide benefits for dementia patients, including preserving a “sense of place,” providing exposure to experiences that stimulate the senses, lessening stress, enhancing feelings of inclusion and stability, and improving psychological and physical health.

Depending on their overall physical health and level of ability, dementia patients may experience nature in a number of ways, including:

- Being near flowers, which have been found to stimulate emotions.
- Viewing natural landscapes.
- Relaxing in a garden, which can improve concentration.
- Getting exposure to natural light, which can have a positive impact on biological systems in dementia patients. Better mood, sleep and behaviour can result.

Encouraging Appropriate Physical Activity

Even for an aging individual whose health is declining, physical activity remains important. To help make physical movement part of your parent’s daily life, consider:



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- Attending organized, group programs, such as those offered at local senior centres. Many formal programs are designed appropriately for aging individuals' physical abilities and skill levels.
- Finding activities that both you and your parent enjoy. Activities can include leisurely strolls around your neighbourhood or bird-watching in a local park.
- Maintaining reasonable expectations of what physical activities your parent can safely do. As your parent's dementia progresses, you'll likely need to adapt activities accordingly. To keep your parent safe and happy and to avoid overexertion, go slowly with all activities and engage your parent one step at a time.

Research has found that music can be soothing to dementia patients and can assist in lessening problematic behaviours, including the aggression and agitation that often occur in middle phases of the disease. Such problem behaviours often occur during bathing and mealtimes.

For the best effect, music should be a genre that the individual has enjoyed listening to earlier in her lifetime, rather than a type that the caregiver prefers. Playing a favourite type of music is known to be a highly effective form of therapy for dementia; even in late stages of Alzheimer's, individuals may tap along



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Using Music and Art

to the beat or sing along to a favourite tune. Through music, dementia patients can continue to communicate even when verbal abilities have deteriorated.

If you use music to help maintain a vibrant life for your loved one with dementia, be sure to choose music that helps set the mood you want. For instance, upbeat music can help bring up happy memories, while more tranquil music can help promote a quiet, calm atmosphere. Encourage your loved one to clap along and even dance, if possible, but shut out competing noises such as televisions to ward off overload of the senses.

Art projects also can provide your parent with a method of expression even as speaking abilities decline. To make best use of art as a mode of therapy, consider these guidelines:

- Ensure that projects are at an adult level and don't make the individual feel demeaned.
- Assist your parent with starting the activity if necessary.
- Provide encouragement by discussing the project.
- Include only safe materials, and avoid any sharp tools and potentially toxic supplies.



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Focusing on Enjoyment Rather than Achievement

To assist your parent with dementia in enjoying meaningful days, avoid communicating pressure to achieve certain goals or benchmarks. Instead, focus on enjoying the current activity. Stress can have a powerful effect on both you and your parent, and it's important to recognize the impact that feelings of severe mental and physical taxation can have.

One of the easiest ways to reduce or eliminate stress is by using humour. Find the funny in whatever activity you're participating in with your loved one, whether it's going to a doctor's appointment, eating a meal or watching television. Research has found that laughing improves blood flow and reduces the risk of heart problems, and it can even help with pain and sleep issues.



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Respecting Dignity

No child wants to think of their parent feeling helpless or disrespected. Whether you or another trusted caregiver are attending to the needs of your parent with dementia, it's vital to respect dignity in everyday activities such as bathing, dressing, hair care, hygiene and other areas. Many seniors are quite modest; by planning and acting carefully, you can support your parent's individual dignity and sense of self, and you can make the experience less alarming or embarrassing.

For dementia patients, bathing and dressing can prove especially confusing and frightening. Depending on the level of activity of your parent, he or she may not require a shower every day, and you can consider using some sponge baths instead. In addition, make sure to:

- Have all needed materials — towels, clothing, personal care products and other supplies — ready in the bathroom before your loved one enters.
- Set the temperature of the air and water to a comfortable level.
- Tell your parent what is happening at each step, and why you are doing certain things. By explaining each part of the process and allowing your parent to do as much as possible, you help preserve his or her individual dignity and feelings of control and choice.
- Use a handheld shower head and make sure safety equipment like grab bars and non-slip mats are available.
- Never leave your parent by himself in the shower or bath.

Getting dressed can present challenges for dementia patients, including deciding what to wear and navigating removing and putting on items, along with working zippers and buttons. To make the process easier, consider:

- Allowing your parent to choose among a small selection of outfits.
- Giving clear prompts at each step if your parent needs assistance.
- Laying out clothing items in the order in which they will be put on.
- Choosing clothing items that are easy to take on and off, including those with elastic waists and Velcro closures.



Helping your Parent with Dementia Enjoy a Vibrant Life

If you're caring for a parent with dementia, expect life to change quickly for both of you. By providing nourishing food, spending time in nature, using art and music, encouraging appropriate physical activity, setting a schedule, focusing on enjoyment, being aware of limitations and respecting dignity, you can support your parent in maintaining a thriving, engaged lifestyle for as long as possible.

It's also important to prepare for a time when you may no longer be able to provide all the support your parent requires to live a healthy, happy life. As your parent's dementia progresses, consider engaging a compassionate, professional caregiver for services including:

- Medication supervision.
- Personal care services like bathing, dressing, foot care and hair care.
- Transportation to appointments.
- Assistance with housekeeping tasks.
- Nursing and end-of-life care.
- Preparation of nutritious meals.
- Joyful companionship.

For more information on how a senior care and home health care services caregiver can provide support, please contact [Living Assistance Services](#).



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