

# The Challenges of Caring for an Individual Living with Dementia

## STRATEGIES FOR CAREGIVERS

1. Promptly evaluate and treat behavioral symptoms.  
This is even more important than ever because doing so will help protect caregivers from burn out.
2. Build a caregiving team/expand the caregiving team
3. Learn and utilize optimal communication approaches when caring for a person with dementia.
4. Create an optimal environment that includes structure and activities.
5. Use community, online resources, and other technologies to their fullest:
  - Online resources and learning modules
  - Assisted living communities
  - COVID-19 adaptations have been made which allow safety to be maintained in spite of COVID-19 e.g. video visits

## CREATE A CAREGIVING TEAM

- Share the caregiving burden with as many family members & friends as possible to help protect from stress related illnesses or burn out
- Make a list of family members (and friends and neighbors) who are willing and able to help and what special skills and talents they possess.
- Give family members specific tasks or assignments that, when possible, use their strengths and talents. Examples include: Preparing meals, running errands, walking the dog, mowing the lawn, doing laundry
- Assign out-of-town family members tasks that do not require them to be geographically close to the patient:
  - Using email to keep all those interested informed
  - Set up a phone tree for efficient communication
- Caring for a family member with dementia can be extremely stressful. Habits of behavior and communication between family members may be intensified by the stress of the situation.
- Periodically solicit feedback and offer praise and thanks

## RECOGNIZING AND RESPONDING TO BEHAVIOR CHANGES

- Behavior changes are a form of communication.
- When a person with dementia experiences a change in behavior the first goal is to determine the meaning or message being communicated.
- Sometimes the meaning or message will be simple or obvious but sometimes it may take a while to understand.
- Even though we are living through the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals living with dementia remain vulnerable to behavioral problems and the triggers for behavioral symptoms remain the same.
- Remember that the emotions and stress of a caregiver will likely be passed to the person who is living with dementia.

- Encourage all involved family members to become as educated as possible about their loved one's dementia, and their preferences and needs
- Encourage care giving family members to attend virtual support groups
- Do not hesitate to set limits if a particular family member is saying or doing things that hurt more than help
- Monitor each care giving family member for signs of physical or psychiatric illness or burn out
- Establish clear lines of authority and communication
- Utilize online courses on how best to communicate with and assist someone who has dementia (e.g. Teepa Snow [teepasnow.com](http://teepasnow.com))



## IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

- Make one request at a time
- Speak clearly and slowly
- Allow time for the patient to respond
- Maintain eye contact
- Assume a comfortable posture with arms and hands relaxed
- Identify the patient's affect and verbalize this for him/her
- Time communications optimally based on circumstances (e.g. hunger, fatigue, background noise, etc.)
- Remember that even when words may no longer convey meaning, volume, rate, and melody of speech may still convey information
- The need to be seen, heard and understood is a part of human nature and does not disappear simply because someone is living with dementia
- Putting a thought, need or emotion into words for them can sometimes be powerfully helpful
- Someone living with dementia may have preserved emotional intelligence
- Strive to avoid triggering feelings of shame

## WORKING WITH CAREGIVERS FOR HIRE TO CARE FOR AN INDIVIDUAL LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

Southern Caregiver Resource Center and Alzheimer's San Diego can assist you to assess the qualifications of caregivers-for-hire. To be COVID-safe, follow these:

- Contact the home health care provider and learn their protocols to reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Check the home health care professional's temperature before they enter your home. Anyone with a temperature over 100.4° F should be excluded from providing care.
- Ask health care professionals if they have been exposed to anyone who has tested positive and if so, do not allow them into your home.
- Ensure that the health care professional washes their hands upon arrival and regularly throughout their time in your home.
- Ask the health care professionals to wear a mask.
- Be aware that bringing anyone into your home increases the risk of COVID.

## DISTRACTION TECHNIQUES

- Presentation of options: "This door is closed but this door is open."
- A compliment: "My that's a beautiful sweater!"
- A request for help: "Please help me fold these towels."
- Other possibly helpful distractions include: food, drink, music, humor.

## HELPFUL ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS

- Arts and crafts
- Baking
- Current events
- Exercise
- Gardening
- Grooming
- Music
- Pets
- Reminiscing
- Singing
- Dancing
- Telling jokes
- Reading
- Card games
- Table games
- Word games including crossword puzzles



## HELPING THE PERSON LIVING WITH DEMENTIA FOLLOW CDC COVID-19 GUIDELINES

- Provide extra written reminders regarding important hygienic practices.
- Consider placing signs in the bathroom and elsewhere to remind people with dementia to wash their hands with soap for 20 seconds.
- Demonstrate thorough hand-washing.
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol can be a quick alternative to hand-washing if the person with dementia cannot get to a sink or wash his/her hands easily.
- Request prescriptions for a greater number of days than usual to reduce trips to the pharmacy.
- Think ahead and make alternative plans for the person with dementia should adult day care, respite, etc. be modified or canceled in response to COVID-19.
- Think ahead and make alternative plans for care management if the primary caregiver should become sick.