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[www.alzmgreatlakes.org](http://www.alzmgreatlakes.org)

## Coping With Sleep Disturbances

### *Helpful Suggestions for a Better Night's Sleep*

by Dorothy Seman, RN, MS, NHA, Clinical Coordinator, Alzheimer's Family Care Center & Internal Dementia Consultant, VA Chicago Health Care System

Many older adults experience disruptions in their sleep patterns. Sleep disturbances are more frequent and can be particularly challenging for family and staff who care for persons with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. The diagnosed person often looks no worse for the wear; meanwhile, family members can be totally exhausted by lack of sleep.

Although caregivers may yearn for a quick fix, the most successful ways of coping usually come about through careful steps to evaluate possible causes, and often trial and error approaches that ultimately help in small steps. Medications may help, but they have side effects and risks that must be carefully weighed.

Most individuals diagnosed with Alzheimer's experience some changes in sleep patterns at some point during their illness. Since the diagnosed person often cannot help us understand why he is not sleeping, virtually all of the detective work falls to family and health care staff. Sometimes there is no clear cause, but there are ways of coping that might not solve the problem, but can make the problem manageable. If you can change at least some of the things that limit sleep, that may be just enough to give you the strength to go on. These questions may guide you in your detective work.



#### *Why Won't My Family Member Go To Sleep?*

It may help to think about several factors that may cause or make a sleep problem worse. These include your family member's personal sleep history; current physical and emotional health needs that diminish his comfort and well-being; the physical environment; and whether he has activities to provide structure and meaning in day-to-day life.

**Sleep history:** It helps to be realistic about what to expect. Has your family member worked the night shift (even if years ago), consistently worked two jobs, or had a long history of fitful sleep habits? Many life-long patterns remain or return as the person's sense of time and place fades.

**Current physical and emotional health:** Since many persons with dementia are also "up in years," many diseases and conditions common in aging may be a factor. Do heart

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or breathing problems, or arthritic pain cause distress when lying down? Does he have routine or periodic medications that may have a side effect of restlessness?

### *The physical environment:*

There may be aspects of the physical environment that the person with dementia cannot express in words. Careful observation on our part may help us find clues about what's upsetting to him. Sometimes the darkness of the night brings forth primitive or childlike fears. Sometimes visual-spatial perceptions play tricks on the mind, creating unspoken fears. The darkness may be disorienting and add to the person's confusion. This may create a feeling of being lost or alone.

### *Sufficient meaningful activities:*

One of the biggest challenges in caring for someone with dementia is creating a structure of meaningful activities throughout the day. Since there are so many other things for a caregiver to do, this is often left to chance. Helping your family member by planning a daily routine of physical and recreational activity around the house can cover part of the day. Family caregivers might consider involving other family members, paid companions, or adult day care as part of the plan of care.


### *What Can I Do?*

Temporary changes in sleep patterns may accompany changes in the person's routine, e.g., a recent hospitalization or stay in respite care, family visiting for the holidays, redecorating the house, short-term illness, return from vacation, etc. Often people return to their normal sleep pattern, with no action required.

If sleep is a consistent problem, you may want to consider jotting down the pattern

that you notice and your thoughts about possible causes and possible actions that you can take. Not all suggestions will be appropriate for your particular family member. You need to consider what would be a good fit. Consider:

- If you think a medical condition may play a role in the person's difficulty or inability to sleep, due to pain or difficulty breathing, contact a doctor familiar with your family member and knowledgeable about dementia for advice and a possible prescription.
- If you think that anxiety, restlessness, fearfulness, worries or paranoia may interfere with the person's sleep, contact a health care professional experienced in dementia or a geriatrician or a geropsychiatrist for advice and a possible prescription.
- Adapt the environment if it seems to undermine a good night's sleep: regulate the temperature and lighting to suit the needs of the person. If your family member prefers to sleep on a comfortable couch or recliner, rather than in a bed in the bedroom, why not be flexible about that?
- Provide the kind of environment that gives comfort to the person. Sometimes "bedtime activities" are overwhelming. Can bathing be done in the morning? Is a change into pajamas worth the added stress? Would your family member feel better if he slept with the light on with soft music playing in the background?

- Look at the whole day, not just the lack of sleep at night. Is your family member engaged in a full range of activities consistent with his interests and abilities? If not, how can you increase activities, especially those that help to provide sufficient physical exercise?
- If your family member naps during the day, in a way that interferes with night time sleep, can the napping be permitted but the length limited?
- Consider developing an evening ritual that is soothing and comforting, a winding down of the day. This may include turning off the TV, going for a walk together, etc.
- Sometimes the person with dementia seems to survive quite nicely on a few hours sleep. The caregiver may be unable to survive on that little sleep. Perhaps none of the previously mentioned approaches apply, or they don't help resolve the problem. Financial resources and family help may be limited. One option may be to provide a safe and secure environment with familiar objects your family member can interact with while he is awake during the night. Make a place to rest or sleep available to him. A "baby monitor" can alert you if he needs your attention.
- Finally, don't give up. Like so many symptoms of dementia, this too shall pass. 


## Chapter Helps Caregivers Manage Challenging Behaviors

### *Intensive Education Series to be Offered in Eight Cities this Summer*

Caring for a person with Alzheimer's disease is a challenging job. Each day, caregivers are faced with numerous problems and behaviors, such as the sleep issues featured in this issue.

To help individuals cope with the constant demands of caregiving, the Michigan Great Lakes Chapter has developed a three-part program titled *"Building Caregiver Skills."* The series, which is being presented in eight cities this summer, offers practical strategies for improving communication and managing challenging behaviors when caring for a person with memory problems. There is a \$15 fee per session or \$40 fee for all three sessions.\* Call the chapter office

nearest you at 800.337.3827 to find out when the program is being offered in your area or visit [www.alzmgreatlakes.org](http://www.alzmgreatlakes.org).

Caregivers coping with sleep problems specifically can also contact the Michigan Great Lakes Chapter to receive information on local adult day services and in-home caregiver respite. These services can offer a structured daily routine of physical and recreational activities that may help with sleep problems at night. Contact the chapter office nearest you at 800.337.3827 for information. 

*\*There is no charge for programs in Kalamazoo and Three Rivers - the fee is paid through a grant by the Area Agency on Aging Region IV.*

## Resources

### *Books*

***"Understanding Difficult Behaviors"***  
Robinson, Spencer and White  
Eastern Michigan University, 1999  
\$14.00

*A book for family and professional caregivers that provides concrete, practical advice on coping with behaviors such as agitation, wandering and personal care issues.*

***"The Complete Guide To Alzheimer's Proofing Your Home"***

Warner  
Purdue University Press, 2000  
\$26.00

*Provides information on outfitting the interiors and exteriors of homes and discusses on how to cope with potential problems related to safety.*

### *Manuals/Brochures*

***"Facts : About sleep changes in Alzheimer's disease"***

Alzheimer's Association, 2002  
*Fact sheet on sleep changes.*

***"Steps to Planning Activities: Structuring the Day at Home"***

Alzheimer's Association, 1998

***To obtain these and other resources, call the chapter office nearest you at 800.337.3827 or visit [www.alzmgreatlakes.org](http://www.alzmgreatlakes.org).***