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Helping with Personal Care Needs

Tips to Make Bathing a More Relaxing Experience

Bathing is one of the most challenging tasks for people with dementia and their care providers. It involves all parts of the body, requires a great deal of cognitive skill, and can be emotionally and physically exhausting for all involved.

Dementia is caused by a variety of disorders which affect different parts of the brain. For example, people with frontal lobe impairment may have trouble organizing the many tasks involved in bathing and therefore find the whole process overwhelming. A person with temporal lobe impairment, on the other hand, may not be able to understand the caregiver's words even if her hearing is intact. Someone with damage to the parietal lobe may be unable to respond to a request to move a part of her body. It is important for caregivers to remember that these and other challenging situations are the result of brain damage.

When bathing a person with dementia, the caregiver needs to explain what is happening, then move slowly through the various steps in the process. It is also helpful to keep in mind that age-related changes in vision, hearing, and touch may add to a person's fearfulness and discomfort with taking a bath or shower.

At a satellite conference on bathing issues, Shelly Weaverdyck, PhD outlined four key factors for caregivers to consider:



Person - Consider the past history and habits of the person you are helping. Remember that the person changes over time and from day to day.

Environment - Consider the physical environment including room temperature, color contrast, texture, lighting, floor pattern and privacy.

Caregiver Interactions - Feel compassion for the person you are helping and be comfortable assisting her; respect the person as an adult; pay attention to verbal and nonverbal feedback; and be aware of what your own body language is communicating to the person bathing.

Task - If the steps involved with bathing are too complex or unfamiliar, perhaps they can be broken down. Consider modifying the steps to fit the person's needs or preferences. For example, if it is too overwhelming to tackle bathing and hair washing all at once, consider washing the person's hair at another time.

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As part of the same satellite conference, Monica Deyo, a professional caregiver, presented techniques she developed for bathing a particular client. Deyo completes the following tasks in preparation for bathing:

- *Select clothes and lay them out on the bed or in the bathroom.*
- *Prepare the bath area with a flannel bath blanket on the floor and a small towel on the floor inside the shower to make it less slippery.*
- *Place shampoo, towels, washcloths, and no-tear soap within easy reach.*
- *Run the water so it's pleasantly warm and steamy in the bathroom.*


Once these tasks are complete, Deyo uses a gentle approach, telling her client "I'm going to help you get dressed for the day," and inviting her for a walk towards the shower area. As she helps her client prepare to get into the shower, she begins singing her client's favorite song. For this individual resident, Deyo has learned that singing this song helps to calm her anxiety. Sometimes the two of them sing the song 20 times or more during the course of the shower. Sometimes, based on the resident's preference, an article of clothing like a T-shirt is left on throughout the shower and then removed at the end. Deyo holds a washcloth over the hand-held shower head as this client, like many people with dementia, is very sensitive to the perception of a forceful rush of water coming at her. This technique can help to soften the appearance of and impact of the water spray. Deyo starts the flow of water on the feet first, makes sure the temperature is to the client's liking, then carefully moves the

water spray upward to continue cleaning. Because hair washing in the shower is often traumatic for this client, Deyo has her step out of the shower and hold a grab bar. She then dampens her hair with a wet towel and gently massages in a small dab of shampoo. She rinses her hair by using a series of wet wash cloths while the client has a towel over her so she won't become cold.

Deyo's example offers many techniques that may be helpful to caregivers struggling with the challenges of bathing. Other tips that can help make bathing a more pleasant experience for both the caregiver and the person with dementia include:

- *Be welcoming and relaxed* as you prepare to invite the person to take a shower. When you bring up the topic of showering, you might promise a special treat like coffee, tea, or cookies after it's over. Be sure to follow through with your promises.
- *Have two of everything available*, like wash cloths and soap, and as you use one, give the other to the person to hold, so she can participate to whatever extent possible.
- *Try to assist the person with undressing in the bathroom*, rather than in a more public place. If the person is resistant, drape a towel over the top part of her body and give assurance that she'll be safe with you.
- *Sometimes providing the more anxious person with towels* to drape over her and even leaving them draped over her body throughout the shower is more agreeable.

- *Position yourself to safely break a potential fall* for an unsteady person by getting into the shower yourself (in casual clothing that can withstand water).
- *Follow the person around to complete activities* such as hair washing, tooth brushing and hair brushing. These tasks don't always have to be done in the bedroom or bathroom.
- *If the attempt to provide the person a shower becomes too distressing* to her, you may need to stop and try it again later.


All of these suggestions are designed to help make the bathing experience appealing. Perhaps the most important lesson for caregivers is to be tuned into the person. Watch for feedback and be ready to respond. Help the person enjoy the experience and get through it with as little loss of energy as possible. Bathing can help people feel better, especially when they are in pain; it can be a relaxing and comforting experience. 

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Steps to Assisting With Personal Care

A person with Alzheimer's disease will gradually experience difficulties with personal care tasks including bathing, dressing, grooming, toileting, eating, and dental care. At first the individual may need only prompting or a little help, but eventually caregivers will become responsible for all personal care tasks. This can be very difficult for the person with Alzheimer's and may signify a loss of independence and privacy.

Caregivers must be aware of the abilities, fears, and reactions of their loved ones in order to provide them with necessary daily care. Following are some helpful suggestions for assisting with personal care tasks:

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| ○ Adapt to the person's needs, routines, and preferences. | ○ Pay attention to nonverbal communication. |
| ○ Help the person remain as independent as possible. | ○ Simplify instructions - use short, simple and direct words. |
| ○ Be flexible - experiment with new approaches. | ○ Coach the person through each step of a task - provide encouragement, praise and reassurance. |
| ○ Consider using different types of personal care products such as tooth brushes or bathing chairs. | ○ Be patient, understanding and sensitive.  |
| ○ Avoid rushing the person through tasks. | |

From "Steps to Assisting with Personal Care," Alzheimer's Association, 1999, reprinted 2003

Resources

Books

"Understanding Difficult Behaviors"
Robinson, Spencer and White
Eastern Michigan University, 1999
\$15.00
A book for family and professional caregivers that provides concrete, practical advice on coping with behaviors such as agitation, wandering and personal care issues.

Brochures/Fact Sheets
"Steps to Assisting with Personal Care"
Alzheimer's Association
1999, reprinted 2003

"Just the Facts and More - Bathing"
Alzheimer's Association
1992

Handouts

"Assisting a Person with Dementia in Bathing: A Satellite Conference"
Mental Health and Aging Project,
Michigan Partnership for Community Caring,
EMU Huron Woods
Alzheimer's Research Program, 2000

*To obtain these and other resources, call the chapter office nearest you at
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