

Alzheimer's
Association
South Central
Michigan Chapter
3810 Packard
Suite 240
Ann Arbor, MI 48108

734 677-3081
734 677-3091 fax
800 337-3827

<http://comnet.org/alzscmc>

Office Hours:
9-5 Monday - Friday

Lansing Resource Center
517 267-2016

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Persons with Late Stage Alzheimer's Disease and Activities of Daily Living

by Dorothy Coons, Emeritus, Associate Research Scientist, Institute of Gerontology, University of Michigan

*This issue continues a series on the stages of Alzheimer's disease
and highlights information and resources that are useful for the late stage.*

Persons in the late stage of Alzheimer disease or other forms of dementia may vary greatly, and it is unclear how much a sense of self they still retain. It is important that caregivers do everything they can to help them maintain a sense of person and not assume that it is lost.

Helping to Retain a Sense of Self

Responses vary greatly from one person to another, and even individuals respond very differently from time to time depending upon the circumstances, the way they may be feeling at the moment, or the way they are being treated. The presence of self may be expressed with smiles or anger, with warm and responsive reactions to children or pets, with looks of contentment when they are touched or hugged.

Since they are no longer able to participate in or respond to most of the activities offered in treatment settings, it is important that caregivers view activities of daily living (ADLs) such as bathing, dressing and feeding not as boring jobs to get done, but as occasions to help the person have as much fun as possible and to have a sense of being loved or cared for.

Sharing in the Moment

Gentle lightheartedness can help the person feel comfortable and relaxed. Joking about the caregiver's awkwardness, never about the impaired person's problems, can sometimes bring a smile. If soap is dropped, for example, the caregiver can chuckle, and say, "I am really something! I'm always dropping things. You'll have to have a lot of patience with me."

A compliment to the impaired person will sometimes bring a smile. For example, "You have the softest skin, Mary. You must always use good lotion." Or "I love to comb your hair. It is so pretty and soft."

Acknowledging Extra Effort

If the person is able to do even a small part of a task, it is important that it is recognized and he is complimented. If he can take a wash cloth and wash some part of his body, the caregiver can say, "You did a good job washing your arms. That was great. You did a better job than I do."

One successful caregiver often sings old songs while she is doing ADLs. One

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especially popular one is "Old McDonald Had a Farm" and occasionally the older person will join in with a few words. For example, to the line "and on his farm he had a duck— —, with a quack, quack here," he might repeat "quack, quack." When this happens the caregiver laughs and gives the older person a big hug. She has a large repertoire of old songs, and she is often able to learn which ones are familiar to each person with whom she works.

Recognizing the Need for Privacy

It is crucial that caregivers recognize each person's need for privacy and dignity. Persons who are now elderly probably grew up in environments that were far more protective and private than many people experience at the present time. Having other persons do very personal things for them can cause embarrassment for even very impaired persons. For example, it is important when a person is being bathed or dressed that no one else enters the area. Caregivers can be reassuring by saying, "We'll pull this curtain so that no one will come in while you're having a bath."

The sensitive caregiver can also often effectively help the impaired person eat more food by joking or chatting in an easy manner or by humming occasionally. The staff person who sits stoically,

and shoves food into the person's mouth can expect rebellion or withdrawal.

Finding Opportunities in Daily Living

The effective caregiver can do so much to help even impaired persons respond. Activities of daily living can be looked upon as opportunities to help persons continue to be a part of the world around them. They offer ways to help them feel that they are valued and loved, and they provide a means of helping even severely impaired persons maintain a sense of self.



Resources for Late Stage Alzheimer's Disease

Brochures & Fact Sheets

Care for Advanced Alzheimer's Disease

Steps to Assisting with Personal Care

Ethical Considerations: Issues in Death and Dying

Autopsy: A Lasting Gift for Your Family

Books

Residential Care: A Guide for Choosing a New Home.

Alzheimer's Association, (1998). Guidance on planning for a move, selecting a residential care facility, and making the transition.

A Caregiver's Guide to Nutrition and Feeding (booklet).

Late Stage Dementia Care (Kovach).

An excellent resource for professional care providers and long term care agencies on enhancing care for late-stage dementia clients.

To obtain these and other resources, contact the chapter office at (734) 677-3081 or (800) 337-3827.