

Tips for Alzheimer's Caregivers



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Today's column is focused on providing tips to those who are family caregivers of

individuals with Alzheimer's disease. I hope you will find these tips practical and helpful.

No two people experience Alzheimer's disease in the same way. As a result, there's no one approach to caregiving. Your responsibilities can range from making financial decisions, managing changes in behavior, to helping a loved one get dressed in the morning. Handling these duties is hard work. But by learning caregiving skills, you can make sure that your loved one feels supported and is living a full life. You can also ensure that you are taking steps to preserve your own well-being.

Tips for family caregivers of individuals placed out of the home:

- 1) Maintain routine and structure; try to minimize changes
- 2) Always check with staff/practitioners regarding medications – what is the family member taking and why; keep a current list at home for your reference
- 3) Keep the family member's room familiar but uncluttered; use good lighting, favorite items and family pictures
- 4) Speak slowly and calmly using simple language
- 5) Smile and touch a lot; both can be comforting and reassuring

- 6) Routinely check clothing for signs of incontinence or bowel accidents; embarrassment may cause the family member to hide soiled clothing
- 7) Provide cards, books and movies; nature and animal documentaries can be particularly soothing
- 8) Write notes, they can revisit these frequently; send cards regularly or small care packages
- 9) Label the important things: the bathroom, the Television remote, etc.; keep a chalk board visible with important family numbers for the staff
- 10) Provide easy-to-remove, cheerful washable clothing
- 11) Keep things simple to avoid frustration
- 12) "Saving face" is important; always allow some sense of control for the individual
- 13) Provide two choices rather than open-ended questions; Do you want to go for a car ride or a walk?
- 14) Pay attention to signs of stress
- 15) Do not accept from staff, "He/She went off for no reason." There is always a reason; we need to take the time to find it – pain, fears, and/or frustration are usually the main reasons.
- 16) Promote and support security and comfort; you cannot reverse the disease
- 17) Check for room temperature, lighting and loss of hearing or eyesight; all of these can activate behavioral changes
- 18) Educate yourself about the disease; your knowledge will help you to accept the changes taking place
- 19) You will be gradually letting go of the person you knew; do it gracefully and fully embrace the emerging new person; love them unconditionally
- 20) The behavioral changes and problems are a result of the disease; do not take things

personally – it is the disease speaking

Tips for Caregivers at Home:

- 1) Plan ahead and anticipate your needs as well as the needs of the person you are caring for; keep an accessible, easy calendar and review it in the morning and evening
- 2) Take one day at a time; once things are on the calendar, try not to fret about them; stay in the moment to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed
- 3) Take care of yourself first; stay on top of your needs for relaxation, respite, time out and pleasurable activities
- 4) Get enough sleep and eat often and healthy; your brain, judgment and emotions will become compromised very quickly if you ignore these two basic needs
- 5) Accept help early and often; no one likes a martyr, you cannot do it all without heavy consequences; figure out what you do best, do well and then fill in with the assistance you need to keep balance in your life
- 6) Educate yourself about the disease and learn about available resources, both educational and supportive; include direct care resources
- 7) Develop a contingency plan before you need one; ask yourself and other family members the "What if...?" questions; anticipate setbacks, disease progression and moments of emergency
- 8) Share your feelings and emotions with other people; find a support group or start one; stay connected to others; you are living through a traumatic event – the illness and gradual loss of a loved one
- 9) Make time for leisure activities; they are just as important on the calendar as doctor's appointment for your loved one; add some moments of special care –

massage, pedicure, dinner out, dinner catered, etc.

- 10) Relax, lower your expectations of yourself and others; keep your health and well-being a priority
- 11) This is a progressive disease; it can be slowed with medication but it cannot be cured or reversed; gradually, you are going to lose the person you have known and loved; take time to share and embrace special moments with them; simple things will become increasingly important; a new person will slowly emerge – remember to love him/her

For more information about Alzheimer's disease and caring for individuals with the disease please visit the Alzheimer's Association's websites, <http://www.alz.org/index.asp> and http://www.alz.org/living_with_alzheimers_caring_for_alzheimers.asp.

Today's column completes the Alzheimer's disease series. My next column will return to the educational series on mental health disorders. The focus will be on Schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders.

Please remember to help us out with our Holiday Project by donating items or money so we may provide Holiday Packs to individuals residing in personal care homes and those who are patients at Wernersville State Hospital. Please contact the MHA office at 273-5781 for more information.

By Shem Heller, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association of Lebanon County