

How to cope with agitation in your loved one who has Alzheimer's

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By William G. Hammond, J.D.

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Many times, understanding the meaning of a word can give us great insight into the issue at hand.

What is agitation? Extreme emotional disturbance. (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language) A stirring up or arousing; disturbance of tranquility; disturbance of mind that shows itself by physical excitement. (Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary). A mental state of extreme emotional disturbance, the feeling of being agitated; not calm. (WorldNet 1.6).

Many Alzheimer's patients experience agitation in addition to memory loss. In the early stages of the illness, people with Alzheimer's may encounter changes in their personality, such as irritability, anxiety or even depression. But as the disease progresses, these symptoms can worsen and become more difficult to live with. They may include sleep disturbances, delusions and hallucinations. Many times Alzheimer's patients cannot get in touch with or express their feelings. So when they experience agitation, it is often difficult for the caregivers to understand and to help.

When a person with dementia displays agitation or other "symptoms," you must try to determine what they are trying to communicate.

Good communication is an important part of any relationship. When caring for a person with dementia, the ability to communicate becomes more and more difficult. Both expressing and processing information becomes impaired. This inability to express and process can be frustrating and can manifest itself as agitation.

Following are some suggestions that may allow you to improve your communication with your loved one who has Alzheimer's: Approach from the front to prevent startling him or her. Maintain eye contact. Lower the tone of your voice. A high pitch may indicate that you are upset. Smile and be pleasant. Talk with a calm presence. Speak slowly, clearly and directly. Identify yourself. Use short, simple sentences. Ask one question at a time. Eliminate background noise. Give plenty of time to

respond. If he/she cannot find words, sometimes it helps if you finish the sentence. Repeat information when needed - repetition is good. Frequently affirm/praise him/her, even for the smallest things, i.e. "Good job," "Thank you," "You're the best!" Validate feelings. Use touch. Touch the shoulder, knee, back, hand. Give hugs many times a day. Don't argue - you'll never win. Laugh together. If your talk becomes "heated," stop. Go back and try again later. Don't talk down. Respect him/her as an adult. Don't correct him/her. Don't demand. Ask nicely. Don't take adverse behavior personally. Slow down! Hurrying increases frustration.

Another issue in agitation is non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication is important to be aware of, both in what we are communicating to our loved ones, and what they are communicating to us. Non-verbal communication is expressed by persons with dementia through body languages, facial expression and tone of voice. At times, the Alzheimer's patient can look into your eyes and seem to read your soul, almost like a "sixth sense." They are sensitive and intuitive to people and things around them. They know when someone is being sincere or not. Body language is as important as their facial

expressions. For example, if your loved one suddenly gets up and walks around, that may indicate the need to go the bathroom. Be alert to those signs and give big hugs as much as possible. A gentle touch will make their life much easier and relaxed.

Environment can also cause agitation. Examples would be where temperatures are too cold or too hot, or lights too strong or too dim. Try to set up an environment that is relaxing for your loved one. It will make his or her life easier. And as your loved one with Alzheimer's relaxes, so will you.

William G. Hammond, JD is a nationally known elder law attorney and founder of The Alzheimer's Resource Center. He is a frequent guest on radio and television and has developed innovative solutions to guide families who have a loved one suffering from Alzheimer's. For more information you can visit his website at

Bath Time For Your Alzheimer's Patient

By William Hammond, J.D.

Caring for an Alzheimer's patient is one of the most difficult things you can do. It involves a lot of energy, time and patience. It can be very frustrating. People with Alzheimer's may refuse help from caregivers. This is a sign that they are actually trying to communicate with you. Refusal to accept care is a sign that something is missing or not right. It's up to the caregiver to assess the situation.

If your loved one refuses to take her bath or shower, this might be a clue that something is bothering her. It may be embarrassment. Remember that your loved one used to do all these things alone before she had Alzheimer's and now she has to depend on another person. It is very frustrating. You may have to limit bath time. Approach the situation one step at a time in a non-threatening manner. While you help your loved one undress, use a smooth calming voice. As you bathe her, you can talk about

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old memories you used to share. It will make the process more enjoyable and pleasant for both of you.

If this does not work and your loved one still resists your help, then you might need try again later. When people with Alzheimer's do not like to bathe, it often stems from fear. Make sure the lighting in the bathroom is adequate for your loved one to see. If she cannot see well, her fear will increase. Let the shower or bath run for a while to warm up the room. It will make it more comfortable. No one likes to undress in a cold room. If your loved one is using a shower, you might want to put a chair in it so she can sit down. You can purchase one of those at a medical supply store or drug store. Use a hand held shower head. This will take the water up to her level and will be less threatening.

Music is a good way to help as well. It can be good therapy. Studies have shown that some Alzheimer's patients react very well to music. They may feel less stress. Music can decrease emotions of agitation or aggressive behavior. You can play soft music; add some fragrance in the bathroom. It will make it more inviting. You can try to use the same rituals your loved one used before when taking a bath or a shower. Routine is extremely important for persons with Alzheimer's.

If you feel there is still tension and resistance, you can always choose another option. You can hire some professional help just for the bathing time. If you decide to get someone to help you, make sure that person has experience with Alzheimer's disease and knows how to handle patients with dementia. You can hire someone on your own or go through an agency. They have qualified people and will be able to assist you in this situation. Sometimes, the individual with dementia will respond better to a third party rather than a family member. Put yourself in her shoes, it can be really embarrassing having someone from your family bathe you. A disinterested, but gentle, third party may help greatly.

The main thing is to handle bath time in a loving manner. Your loved one will appreciate it and it will lower her stress level, as well as yours.

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