

**Basic Communication & Safety Tips for Alzheimer’s Families**

***Primary Rule:*** *The more confused your parent feels, the more difficulty you will have communicating and accomplishing even the simplest task. These ten tips will help keep both you and your parent on a more even emotional plane, and that will make routine tasks simpler.*

Very few tasks are more stressful for a family member than being an Alzheimer’s caregiver. As you and your family find it more difficult to care for or communicate with your parent, you may be more apt to be angry and frustrated. At the more advanced stages of the disease, you may be caring for someone you’ve known for fifty years, but who doesn’t recognize you in return.

Your mother may look at you innocently, call you by the wrong name, and begin to tell you about her daughter whom she calls by the name of your grandmother. Your father, with whom you’ve had a lifelong close relationship and who adored his grandchildren, may ask you who you are and tell you he’s sorry he didn’t have children. It’s easy to understand why depression is so prevalent in Alzheimer’s families. It’s also easy to understand the anger you might feel when a parent asks the same question repeatedly even though you answered it seven times in the last five minutes, walks away in response to a request to “sit down, Mom,” or even becomes aggressive and actually strikes you with no warning and for what appears to be no reason at all. There is a reason for all these actions and reactions.

We learn by association and memory. When your parent’s memory fails, your parent may no longer remember the names of beloved family members, pets, friends, his home address, telephone numbers, eating and personal grooming habits, and all the rest of a lifetime’s learning and memory storage. Your parent doesn’t remember asking the same question repeatedly (or even once before), may not remember what “sit down, Mom” means, and may act aggressively out of fear, confusion, frustration that she is unable to communicate with you—or simply because her actions are part of Alzheimer’s disease.

Because you can’t “see” the impaired cognitive function of your parent’s brain, your parent may look perfectly healthy. It’s difficult for caregivers with normal memory function to imagine living with no memories of as recent a time span as five minutes ago. These 10 tips can help ease your stress:

1. ***Don’t Take Outbursts Personally*:** your parent isn’t in control, Alzheimer’s is. Mom can neither adjust nor manage her behavior.
2. ***Keep your Requests Simple*:** One request at a time and wait for completion. Try to use the same words/phrasing every time. Examples:
   * + - 1. *“Come in, Mom.”* (smile , use your arm to motion Mom in, and wait for her to enter the room before continuing).
         2. *“Sit down”* (touch the chair to clue Mom in to the meaning of your words & wait until Mom sits before continuing).
         3. *“Here’s your juice, Mom”* (touch Mom warmly on her arm or shoulder while smiling and putting her juice in front of her).
         4. Whenever possible, ask short, simple questions with “yes” or “no” answers and use props to give meaning to your words as in #3. Avoid frustration by avoiding choices whenever possible.
3. ***Be aware of Your Physical Attitude*:** tight lips, tense posture, hands folded across chest will cause the AD patient fear and destroy communication. Touch accompanied by pleasant facial expressions and warm physical expressions help reassure Mom she’s safe: smile, hug, and touch Mom gently and warmly as often as possible.
4. ***Use Strategies When Eating Out****:* eat at non-peak times to avoid crowds; Alzheimer’s prevents Mom from understanding the menu and multiple choices mean confusion and frustration. Offer one choice at a time for a “yes” or “no” answer: “would you like chicken, mom?” If Mom refuses, offer another choice.
5. ***Avoid Crowds*:** Crowds will “crowd” Mom, make her anxious and turn a pleasant outing into a difficult time with unmanageable behavior.
6. ***Make Appointments for Midmorning*:** Aggression, confusion, and Sundowning symptoms are more prevalent in the afternoon.
7. ***Make Sure Professional Healthcare Workers Are Savvy about AD***: When you make an appointment for Mom, ask if the dentist or doctor has experience treating an Alzheimer’s patient. Alzheimer’s robs Mom of the ability to recognize her doctor or understand his actions. Hold Mom’s hand and talk to her softly during the visit to help keep her calm.
8. ***Build in Routines and Encourage Pleasurable Activities*:** Routine is the cornerstone of stress reduction for AD patients. Try to do the same activity at approximately the same time every day. Check with you local Alzheimer’s organizations for activities that are appropriate to Mom’s abilities.
9. ***Use Day-Care Programs*:** Day care provides peer communication, mental and physical stimulation, both of which are mandatory to decrease problem behavior. Look for an Alzheimer’s or Dementia-Specific daycare for best results.
10. ***Be Sure to Take Appropriate Safety Measures*:** safety locks (baby locks are excellent) on cabinets to prevent accidental injury from knives, poisons (dishwashing or laundry soap, non edible items). Assume Alzheimer’s has destroyed Mom’s ability to discern cleaning fluid from milk or a knife from a teaspoon.

***Bonus: Always remember, you have the knowledge, insight, and power to make the right decisions for you and your family. ©***

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(T) 561-277-9544 • (E) *JR@prefsvcs.com*