



island health
Geriatric Specialty Services

Advice to Caregivers - Reassure and Don't Argue

-Annette Fuller

Dr. B. Jones always dispenses this advice to the Alzheimer's caregivers who come through his office. You will never win an argument with an Alzheimer's patient.

"Family members simply cannot recognize how severe the memory loss is," he said. "They see the same person on the outside and just can't comprehend how different they are on the inside."

Doctors specializing in geriatrics and other seniors advocates shared their tips on living day to day with an Alzheimer's patient.

Set up a no-argue zone. "If you argue with a person with dementia, both people just end up upset, and nothing is accomplished," said Dr. K. Sink. "With dementia, logic and reasoning are failing, and the person with dementia truly believes that the way they think is correct."

Keep communication short and direct. "If a certain attempt is not working, come back to it later, maybe another way," Jones said. "You must pick your battles, and you must be flexible as a caregiver."

Don't correct everything, especially if it is inconsequential. "If you try to make a point, it doesn't matter, because two minutes down the road, she won't remember it anyway," said S. Trotter, who takes care of his mother.

But what if the things the Alzheimer's patient says really are untrue and are harmful? One Alzheimer's patient, for example, told everyone she met that her daughter was spreading lies about her.

"You may never be able to convince her of the truth," Sink said. "In this case, for example, the daughter might have to make phone calls privately to the people her mother has spoken to and say, 'This really didn't happen.' But mostly, the people already know that the mother has problems."

Don't take away what the Alzheimer's patient can do. Pick an activity that is appropriate to the person's level. If she can't cook an entire meal, perhaps she can slice the tomato for the salad. "Allow them to do as much as possible, even if it's not up to standard," Sink said.

Do things on a schedule as much as possible. This usually means less hassle.

Don't let the person see you get upset. Hide it and vent later.

Don't treat the person like a child, even if some behaviours are childlike.

Don't push someone to do things he can not, such as a crossword that is too difficult.

If a person with dementia is upset, try to get at the underlying emotion. For example, one man with Alzheimer's routinely worried that his money was going to run out and that he would be left poor. His daughter kept his bank statements nearby, showing them to him again and again and he would relax a bit each time.

Sometimes it almost takes stumbling upon the right words to calm an Alzheimer's patient. Sink told the story of one woman with dementia who worried constantly about her parents, who had long since died. She shouted out for them again and again. Finally, someone told her that they knew where she was and loved her very much. She was satisfied with that and relaxed, at least for awhile.

Perhaps most important: Caregivers must give themselves a break. Take advantage of the supports, people and programs in the community that can help.

"The biggest problem I see is that caregivers work themselves to death," Jones said. "Literally. I have seen some caregivers who died before the Alzheimer's patient did. Lower your expectations and take it day by day."