

## **Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home**

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

### **Twelve Tips for Caring for Alzheimer's Patients**

#### *Accurate Records and Organization Ease the Burden*

Among our many patients we have a few afflicted with Alzheimer's, a debilitating condition that robs people not just of their memories, but also of their independence. Caring for Alzheimer's patients is particularly challenging, both for the reasons above as well as for the frustration these patients often express.

Whether you're caring for an Alzheimer's patient yourself or you're working with someone who's caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's, the following twelve tips can help alleviate much of the patient's frustration regarding his or her condition and establish a routine that makes caring for that individual much easier.

**1. Use distraction to reroute behavior.** Alzheimer's patients typically ask nonsensical questions or become upset over hallucinations. In their mind their sister who died ten years ago is still a teenager and is standing right there in their bedroom. Their beliefs represent their realities. They can get stuck on an idea. A good technique to reroute their behavior is to distract them. Ask questions about their early youth... Talk about the weather... There are many ways to use distraction to reroute unwanted behavior.

**2. Don't sweat the small stuff.** Sure, it's frustrating your Alzheimer's patient hides things or when they turn off the oven while you're cooking something. Yes, they may rearrange the cabinets daily or repeatedly hum the same tune. But these symptoms aren't life threatening and, in some cases provide comfort and solace for your loved one—which is after all what you want.

**3. It's not all small stuff.** Most of the time, it helps if you adopt a "live and let live" approach. Familiar routines, though seemingly strange to you, can comfort your patient and make caring for him or her easier. Sometimes, however, an Alzheimer's patient may do something really harmful—to you or to others. At that point you need to step in and take control. It's up to you to establish what is acceptable and what is not in your home.

**4. Don't lie.** Many Alzheimer's patients are already fearful. When you are untruthful—even if they believe you—they may sense your discomfort with what you're telling them (not to mention the fact that lying doesn't make you feel any better). For example, if they say their sister who passed away thirty years ago is coming over for tea, don't tell them she called and said she isn't coming. Try using distraction techniques and avoid lying.

**5. Praise lavishly and frequently.** Alzheimer's patients are unable to perform even the easiest tasks, and they live in a world of frustration, isolation and despair. They realize they are treated differently than they used to be. As a care provider, you must praise every task. For example, one of my care providers thanks her patient profusely any time

she does the dishes. Complimenting your loved one is a highlight of care giving... and it makes everyone feel better.

**6. Understand and respond to their physical needs.** It's difficult for Alzheimer's patients to convey to you their needs. For example, a member of my staff saw one of her patients wandering around. She told me about it; I said that many times wandering indicates a physical need. Try to learn the signals of when your loved one needs to use the restroom, or have other elemental needs that must be addressed.

**7. Carefully and diligently administer all medications.** The Alzheimer's Association encourages care providers to learn about all medications before administering them. Make sure you know exactly what each pill is for as well as its possible side effects. Before you administer the medication, explain to your patient exactly what each pill is for, and why and how your patient needs to take it. Keep accurate records of each medication taken, the dose, and when taken. Keep medications well-organized and stored safely out of reach in a locked cabinet or drawer.

**8. Don't turn taking medicine into a struggle.** If your patient doesn't want to take it right then and there, try again later. Make the task as easy as possible: Ask your pharmacist for liquid, which is often easier to administer than a pill.

**9. Create a safe haven for your loved one.** Alzheimer's patients need a place in which things are familiar and comfortable. Create the safe haven by putting up pictures of loved ones—especially their parents and siblings—as these may be the only people they remember. Put as many of their favorite things from the past in their room as possible.

**10. Refer frequently to “the good old days.”** The memories of Alzheimer's patients inevitably regress: They don't remember yesterday, but they may remember what they wore at their wedding. Remember that it's comforting to Alzheimer's patients to talk about their childhood because it is a safe and reliable memory of better days. Digging out old photo albums is a great idea!

**11. Get respite care before you need it.** Contrary to what you may think, getting respite care before you need it is good for you and your loved one. You need a break and the patient needs to establish a trusting relationship with the respite care provider.

**12. Remember to take care of yourself.** Care-giving is a 24/7 job. Family care providers get precious time off and generally very little thanks. Don't feel guilty about occasionally pampering yourself.

Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home.

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