

42 DEALING WITH DEMENTIA REQUIRES CHANGE IN THINKING

Dementia. Alzheimer's. Those are some scary words.

Recently I attended a great program, and would like to share just a few key ideas with you. It was called Coping with Challenging Behaviors in Dementia Care, presented by Jason Schmitz, RN, owner of Heartwood Homes Senior Living, and an expert on dementia care.

Schmitz's first point was that in the early stages of dementia/Alzheimer's, loss of control can be a big concern to your parent. Don't take normal tasks away; keep them involved whenever possible. If there are past-due bills that aren't getting paid, don't take over the job, instead, work with Dad. Maybe, let him write the checks. You can help by stuffing and mailing the envelopes. Let him still retain some control.

Second, as the disease progresses, Mom/Dad's reality changes. Their past becomes their present. They are actually living in their past. It is their current reality. They've changed how they think so you need to change how you think.

Quit explaining the same thing to your parent over and over again. It causes them unnecessary stress. If you find yourself saying "Mom, don't you remember, I already told you?" Stop!

Enter their world, their reality. Learn to speak their language.

This is a new culture for us. We are so accustomed to parenting and correcting errors. Do you tell Dad he is doing something the wrong way? Not in his reality. Instead of correcting the behavior, ask yourself if there is a reason he is doing that if it is from the reality he is currently in. Change your own approach to make this a win-win situation.

When you visit, develop a so-what attitude. If what they are doing isn't a risk to them or others, so what? If Dad keeps picking up papers and stacking them, so what? Maybe he was an accountant, and it's normal. Taking away the papers without distracting him or replacing the task with something else can cause frustration for him.

Don't forget to bring your sense of humor to your visits.

Another of Schmitz's lessons was that when you do go to visit, remember routine is security. Taking someone out of his or her schedule can be stressful. If you fly into town and have a big day planned of shopping, lunch and casino, you can really upset Mom's routine, which can cause her anxiety.

You can still have good times. Instead, spend quality time doing activities she enjoys and are at her current ability and interest level. Keep things calm and comfortable. Smile.

Consider simply validating what they are feeling. Try it a couple times. If Dad asks you where his sister Judy is, what need is he trying to fill? Either fulfill the memory or distract. If you respond with, "Dad, you know she is dead. Remember?" It doesn't accomplish anything. Instead, try validating his feeling, like "I understand that you miss her. Tell me about Aunt Judy." Ask questions about her. Instead of correcting, move on.

Remember, they are trying the best they can. You're the one with the healthy brain.

Further in the progression, you may feel it isn't worth visiting your parent. Two out of three times Mom may get your name wrong. So what? You're still fulfilling her need to have her hand held that day, the human need to be hugged, to talk with someone. Just being there to sooth her is a gift.

She still needs human contact in her life. Who better to give it to her than you? She still will pick up on the voice of her children, their touch.

She doesn't need you less, she needs you different.