

Tips for Spousal Caregivers

by Lori Lataille

Alzheimer's disease, the most prominent form of dementia, is a progressive and degenerative mental disorder that affects cognitive function, memory, and even physical attributes. In general, dementia is a blanket term used to refer to a group of symptoms that involve the loss of cognitive functioning and behavioral abilities that interfere with daily life. Alzheimer's disease is just one of many forms of dementia. Unfortunately, Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia is something that primarily affects older individuals and seniors.

Because these disorders are progressive, symptoms may start small but as time passes, they can become more and more severe and lead to problems performing day-to-day tasks. If this occurs, dementia patients will likely have to enlist the help of a caregiver or an assisted living facility.

For many married couples, when a husband or wife begins to show signs of serious dementia the spouse will oftentimes become the caregiver for their loved one. With that said, dementia caregiving can be a burdensome thing and lead to many challenges and obstacles in a relationship. If you

don't know how to navigate the issues properly, it can lead to problems and rifts in the relationship.

Common Relationship Problems

For many, these problems in the relationship can lead to tension and even loss of relationships. Dementia is stressful, not only for the patient but for the caregiver as well. In fact, caregivers for those with dementia are at an increased risk of stress, depression, and many other health complications.

The *Journal of Family Nursing* conducted a study and overview of spousal caregiving to look at some of the common problems in the relationships that led to issues.

Some of the common themes in testimonies that they received found communication problems like not being able to talk and or socialize. Moreover, when the disorders got in the way of plans that they've had for a long time, such as travel, it can dramatically interfere with the relationship. Agitation, a common symptom of dementia, is another problem that often interferes with and can lead to strained relationships.

When a spouse cares for their loved one with Alzheimer's disease, it can lead to the spouse caregiver feeling overburdened and even depressed. This can work to exacerbate the problems between the couple and create a rift in the relationship that can sometimes be irreparable.

Some testimonies from the study found that many couples ended up losing their relationship.

"It's like he doesn't...have anything to offer... it's...it's different," one testimony read. "We had planned to travel some after he retired... It's a lot different... And just our life has changed dramatically. And it will continue to. We have more bad days than good days now...you just try to make the best of it and go on."

Continued on page 2



Mission

To provide a comprehensive and coordinated system of services designed to promote the independence and dignity of older persons and their families in Muskegon, Oceana, and Ottawa – a mission compelling us to target older persons in greatest need but to advocate for all.



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Tips for Spousal Caregivers, continued from page 1

Despite these common problems that many spousal caregivers face, there are ways to improve the outcome and hopefully avoid detrimental effects on the relationship.

Tips for Spousal Caregiving

According to a report from the University of Buffalo, spouses becoming caregivers for their ailing partners is quite common in America.

The study found that when caregivers believe that their help is appreciated it leads to increased health benefits and happier moods. This means that clear and open communication with loved ones suffering from dementia can help.

“This study adds to a growing body of evidence showing that it is important to target emotional communication between spouses in daily support interactions to improve psychological well-being in the context of chronic conditions and disability,” the report said.

Moreover, one of the things that can often lead to tension in the relationship is caregiver stress. Caregiver stress is a problem that many caregivers deal with in which they experience issues such as impatience, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, changes in mood, and more. Unfortunately, these issues can cause caregivers to take their frustrations out on their spouse, putting more tension on the relationship.

Caregivers can make a few lifestyle changes to help reduce their levels of stress. For example, getting a well-balanced diet and proper exercise will help improve mental and physical health. Caregivers can also make these lifestyle changes along with their partner, which will not only improve their mood but can help to strengthen and solidify the relationship between the spouses.

Dementia poses a few problems for the patient and the caregiver, especially if the caregiver is a spouse; it can lead to rifts in the relationship. Caring for a loved one with dementia or Alzheimer’s may be one of the most difficult challenges you face; hopefully, these tips can help you and your loved one find the best way to work through the challenges and keep a strong relationship. ❖



Understanding What a UTI Is.

from *TRUALTA*

- Identify the signs & symptoms of UTIs.
- UTI Prevention
- UTI dementia/cognitive impairment

What is a UTI?

Urinary Tract Infections, also known as UTIs, are caused when abnormal bacteria enter any part of the urinary system. A UTI can happen in the following areas:

- The **urethra**, which is where urine passes out of the body.
- The **bladder**, where urine is collected in the body.
- The **ureters**, which are the tubes between the bladder and kidneys.
- The **kidneys**, which remove waste and extra fluid from your body.

Most UTIs affect the lower urinary tract, usually the bladder and urethra. But sometimes these lower tract infections can spread up to the kidneys and cause more serious complications. UTIs are more common in women, and older adults are at higher risk of developing UTIs.

Signs and Symptoms of UTI

UTIs can have different symptoms depending on the area of the urinary tract that is affected. It's important to understand that for older adults, confusion alone does not mean a urinary tract infection.

Possible symptoms of a lower UTI may include:

- Burning or painful urination
- Needing to “go” more often than usual or frequency of urination.
- Repeated strong urges to “go,” or urgency to urinate.
- Blood in the urine. The urine may look red, pink, or dark tea colored.
- The person may or may not have a fever.
- Pain or pressure in the lower pelvis area. This could be mistaken for gas or menstrual cramps.
- New or different discharge in the genital area

An upper UTI is an infection of the urinary tract which also includes an infection in the kidneys. The symptoms of an upper UTI may include:

- New pain in the middle of the back or side areas
- Fever
- Shaking/chills
- Nausea/vomiting



January's Website

www.caregiver.org

Quotes

“To read a book in January is as lovely as to go for a walk in June.”

– Jean Paul

“Once you replace negative thoughts with positive ones, you'll start having positive results.”

– Willie Nelson

“One kind word can warm three winter months.”

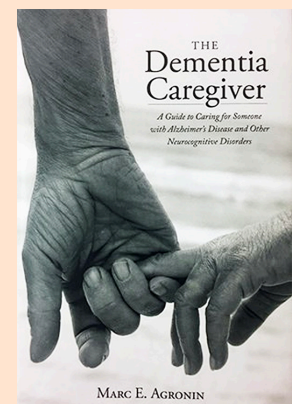
– Japanese proverb

This Month's Book

The Dementia Caregiver

by Marc E. Agronin

Becoming a caregiver for someone with Alzheimer's disease can be an underappreciated, and yet noble role. Because of the nature of these disorders, the only way to become an effective caregiver is to become well-informed about the disease.



Continued on page 4

Family Caregiver Tools: Planning a Family Meeting

by Erin Schmidt



Nobody can predict the future, but there are ways to be more prepared for whatever is in store. Almost nothing is more crucial in times of family crisis than having the family support system ready to act. Often in these situations, the responsibility is taken on by one family member, or the “matriarch.” But this can be a lot for one person to take on, so the importance of asking for help is crucial.

So what’s the first step for mobilizing family members to help take action? Family meetings are a great tool—they can help family caregivers delegate tasks and rally support around a loved one in crisis.

The Society of Certified Senior Advisors (CSA) has outlined some guidelines for planning a family meeting:

Include all the core family members. Ideally, have everyone get together in-person. If (a) family member(s) cannot be present physically, have a conference call so that they are part of the conversation. If you will be discussing the fate of a loved one, it may be best not to have them

Continued on page 5

Understanding What a UTI Is, continued from page 3

It’s important to note that a person with an upper UTI may also have the symptoms of a lower UTI that have already been mentioned.

Older adults who have permanent catheters may have some of the symptoms like pain, fever, and blood in urine, but could also have:

- Discharge from around the catheter; and
- New pain, swelling, or tenderness in the genitals or testicles

A UTI is treated with antibiotics if a person has any of these symptoms and also has a positive urine test for bacteria.

When someone might not need antibiotics

Everyone lives with some bacteria in their urine and urinary tract. Most of these bacteria in the body have a positive effect on health and influence the body’s natural functions. It only becomes a problem when the bacteria balance changes or bacteria from outside of the urinary tract gets in. This is the cause of UTIs.

Bacteria in the bladder might not mean that someone has a UTI. Some people have bacteria in their bladder that is not causing any harm. This is more common in people that have catheters, older adults, and women who are sexually active and/or have diabetes. This can also happen to people that have had recent surgery on their urinary tract.

Bacteria that are not causing harm or symptoms of a UTI is not normally treated because giving antibiotics can change the balance of bacteria in the body, sometimes allowing other harmful bacteria to grow. Antibiotic overuse can lead to antibiotic resistance and other side effects for older adults, and this is why it’s important to focus on other symptoms like pain, fever, or urgency to pee, rather than just a urine test that shows bacteria in the urinary tract.

Preventing a UTI

The following things can help to prevent UTIs:

- Encourage drinking fluids, especially water. Avoid or decrease fluids and foods that irritate the bladder, such as alcohol, citrus juices, drinks containing caffeine, and spicy foods.



- Promote proper genital and urinary hygiene, especially for women. After a bowel movement, the genitals should be wiped from front to back to reduce the chance of dragging bacteria from the rectal area to the urethra.
- When possible, take showers instead of baths.
- A doctor can decide if a low-dose vaginal cream for postmenopausal women will help prevent UTIs.
- Urinate immediately before and after sex. This may help flush out bacteria that may have been introduced during intercourse. Wash the genital area with warm water before having sex. Use a water-based lubricant during sex if there is vaginal dryness.
- Don't douche or use feminine deodorants on the genital area.
- Wear cotton underwear and avoid tight-fitting clothing and pantyhose.



UTI and dementia

People with dementia or cognitive impairment may have trouble with communication, making it harder to tell someone that they have symptoms of a UTI. Sometimes they will have changes in behavior, but it's important to understand that behavior changes can also be a symptom of other problems. The most common cause of behavior changes for people with dementia/cognitive impairment is dehydration and can be easily fixed by encouraging them to drink more water.

While a positive urine test can show that there's bacteria in the urine, it's important that caregivers watch for other symptoms to avoid antibiotic overuse. Here are some of the symptoms you may notice:

- Worsening urinary frequency or urgency. You may notice they are having more accidents than usual.
- Sudden pain with urination. If you can't tell if they are having pain, you can watch for behavior changes while they're urinating. This may be a non-verbal cue like a grimace or expression of pain or discomfort.
- They may have tenderness in the lower abdomen, just above the pubic bone.

A positive urine test with at least 2 symptoms would confirm that it's a UTI that needs to be treated with antibiotics.

If you notice the symptoms of a lower or upper UTI, talk with your healthcare provider for treatment and next steps. ❖

Family Caregiver Tools: Planning a Family Meeting, continued from page 4

present at the first meeting (to ensure other family members can discuss this very important topic openly without fear that they will hurt or scare the loved one).

Select a comfortable, neutral, and private location for the meeting. Make sure you find a place in which everyone can feel at ease. Also, anticipate that the meeting could get heated, so privacy is key.

Establish the main purpose of the meeting and set a short agenda. This will help your family stay on-task and organized in addressing (the) major issue(s) rather than seeking to solve every possible issue in just one meeting.

Collect and share information. Gather information to ensure everyone has the same working knowledge of your loved one's condition(s) and/or disease(s).

If you don't feel comfortable managing the meeting, bring in a mediator. Consider enlisting or hiring someone more comfortable with the mediator role. ❖



What Did You Say?

by Jennifer Buckley



Do you find the need to repeat yourself often to the person you are caring for? Does your talking level closely resemble your yelling level just so your loved one can hear you? Are you speaking so slowly that you end up losing your train of thought?

It is possible that the person you are caring for is one of the 28 million Americans experiencing hearing loss. Unlike incontinence, hearing loss is a natural sign of aging due to a change in the structure of the ear. After age 65, one out of three Americans at least partially loses their hearing. However, it is not only a result of the aging process. There are other causes of hearing loss that include:

- Build-up of earwax
- Chronic middle or inner ear infections
- Medical conditions like diabetes or a brain tumor
- High blood pressure
- Exposure to excessive noise like heavy machinery
- A blood clot in the nerves of the ear
- High blood pressure
- Tinnitus- (a common syndrome indicated by a ringing sensation in the ear)

Continued on page 7

Emotional Exhaustion

Source: *National Institute on Aging*

Do you worry about your health and who will take care of you? Have you recently lost a loved one? Or have you lost your mobility and independence? Emotional stresses like these can take a toll on your energy. Fatigue can be linked to many conditions, including:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Grief from loss of family or friends
- Stress from financial or personal problems
- Feeling that you no longer have control over your life.

Not getting enough sleep can also contribute to fatigue. Regular physical activity



can improve your sleep, help reduce feelings of depression and stress, and boost your mood and overall well-being. Yoga, meditation, deep breathing, and stretching may help reduce stress and anxiety and help you get more rest. Therapy or certain medications may also help relieve anxiety and depression that may be contributing to fatigue.

Talk with your doctor about if your mental health seems to be affecting your sleep or making you tired.

Lifestyle habits and fatigue

Some lifestyle habits can make you feel tired, such as:

- **Staying up too late.** A good night's sleep is important to feeling refreshed and energetic. Try going to bed and waking up at the same time every day.
- **Having too much caffeine.** Drinking caffeinated soda, tea, or coffee, or even eating chocolate, can keep you from getting a good night's sleep. Limit the amount of caffeine you have during the day and avoid it in the evening.
- **Drinking too much alcohol.** Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant that changes the way you think and act. It may also interact negatively with certain medicines.
- **Getting too little or too much exercise.** Regular exercise can help boost your energy levels. Overdoing it without proper rest can cause stress and lead to fatigue.
- **Boredom.** If you were busy during your working years, you may feel lost about how to spend your time when you retire. Engaging in social and productive

activities that you enjoy, such as volunteering in your community, can help maintain your well-being.

Tips to feel less tired.

Making changes to your lifestyle may help you feel less tired, for example:

- **Exercise regularly.** Almost anyone, at any age, can do some type of physical activity. If you have concerns about starting an exercise program, ask your doctor if there are any activities you should avoid. Moderate exercise may improve your appetite, energy, and outlook. Some people find that exercises combining balance and breathing (for example, tai chi or yoga) improve their energy.
- **Try to avoid long naps (over 30 minutes) late in the day.** Long naps can leave you feeling groggy and may make it harder to fall asleep at night. Read *A Good Night's Sleep* for tips on getting better rest at night.
- **Stop smoking.** Smoking is linked to many diseases and disorders, such as cancer, heart disease, and breathing problems, all of which are associated with fatigue.
- **Ask for help if you feel swamped.** Some people have so much to do that just thinking about their schedules can make them feel tired. Working with others may help a job go faster and be more fun.
- **Participate in activities you enjoy.** Socializing with friends and family or volunteering in your community can help you feel more engaged and productive throughout the day.
- **Eat well and avoid alcohol.** Eating nutritious foods can give you energy throughout the day. Staying away from alcoholic drinks can help you avoid negative interactions with medications.
- **Keep a fatigued diary.** This can help you find patterns throughout the day when you feel tired. It can also help you plan out activities that may give you more energy. ❖



What Did You Say?, continued from page 4

- **Meniere's Disease-** (excess fluid in canals of the inner ear)

Before deciding upon the kind of treatment the person you are caring for should receive their doctor should determine the cause of their hearing loss. But you can provide some helpful hearing care hints to your loved one to help them communicate more easily.

- Look at people when they are talking to you.
- Begin relying on your sense of sight by installing a flashing bulb on doorbells, telephones, and fire alarms.
- Limit background noise during conversations
- Sit in the front row during church, school, or in an auditorium.
- Look into buying an assisted hearing dog that responds to certain noises.
- Check out hearing aids. You can buy one on a 30-day trial period.



- Ask about assisted hearing devices before you buy a television.

Helping your loved one to hear better will not only benefit them, but it will also benefit you greatly. ❖

2024

Happy New Year

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