

## More Than Reminiscing

by Elaine Magary, MSW, LISW,

As caregivers, it is an understatement to say that our lives are busy. Our days may be filled with endless tasks such as helping a parent with bathing, administering medications, managing appointments and insurance claims. We may be balancing caregiving with employment and many other responsibilities. Checking off as many items as possible from our to-do list becomes our priority.

However, what is often most important to the person we are caring for is not the "doing" but the "being." Recently I saw an older patient who had many contacts through the day from his son as well as the numerous health care workers who come to his home. However, he was very lonely. No one was able to spend the time to do what mattered most to him ... have a meaningful conversation.

For many older adults whose health is compromised, these conversations may naturally focus on reminiscing about the past. It is important to recognize that these conversations are not just an exercise in "reliving the good old days"; they have therapeutic value. They fulfill what I believe is a universal need as we age ... to know that our life has had meaning and value and that we have made a difference to others. We can help our family members in this process by being fully present and actively engaging in meaningful conversations.

### Begin By Gaining an Empathetic Perspective

As caregivers, we may often feel that there aren't enough hours in the day to accomplish everything.

Time passes quickly as we juggle multiple responsibilities. The time perspective for ill older adults is different. Days may go slowly, and their world becomes smaller as activities, abilities, and relationships diminish. They may



perceive that it has been a long time since we've seen them when in fact this is not the case. And while they may appreciate the tasks we do, what they truly value is meaningful time with us. It's also important to recognize the many losses our family members may be experiencing, such as friendships, independence, activity, and the ability to care for themselves and others. They no longer have these as sources to bring them a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment in their daily lives.

### The Value of Reminiscence

Regardless of whether the older person has memory loss, the desire to reminisce is common because of the multiple losses that are experienced. Reminiscence provides an opportunity for our family members to recall a time when they were independent, active, productive, and in control of their lives. As an active listener, we can begin where they are in terms of what they want to discuss. We can ask questions to gain more detail about their experiences. Most importantly, reminiscence allows us the opportunity to

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*Reminiscing, continued from page 1*

reflect and validate their accomplishments and contributions.

### **Validating Worth and Value**

As a social worker, I reflect on older people the meaning and values that I notice as they reminisce, reinforcing the impact they have made on others. I also focus on the choices they made which contributed to positive outcomes in their life. Some common include:

- It sounds like you really worked hard and sacrificed to make a good life for your family.
- You really provided a meaningful childhood for your kids, building wonderful memories and teaching them important values.
- You had a passion for your job, it sounds like you found your calling and were successful in your career.
- You had so many experiences in your life, it seems that you have lived a very full life.
- You were really a survivor; what tremendous strength and courage you displayed in getting through those difficult times.
- You have such an important role in your grandchildren's lives, you are passing on your values to them.
- You have raised your kids right because now they are here for you.
- Caring for others has always been important to you not only with family but in your volunteer work.
- You really took your marriage vows seriously and cared for your spouse in good times and bad.

### **The Impact of Meaningful Conversations**

Sometimes these discussions will raise past regrets or disappointments; this is an opportunity to reconcile these experiences, putting them in perspective and perhaps leading to forgiveness of self or others. Frequently these communications will elicit a brightening of mood and a sense of satisfaction and contentment. They may also lead to greater acceptance of current challenges as they are put in the perspective of their life's journey. For us as caregivers, these conversations can be meaningful as well, as we may gain a renewed appreciation for their life and compassion for the challenges they are experiencing.

So, as we slow down from the hectic pace of accomplishing tasks and take time to be fully present with our family member we will find that our interactions will be more fulfilling, and our lives enriched in the process. And years from now when we remember our loved ones, it won't be that completed to- do list that brings us a sense of peace and contentment, but rather the memory of the meaningful conversations we had that honored their well lived life.

# Caregiver Tips for Traveling

Traveling long distances with a person in the early stage of dementia may still be quite enjoyable. As dementia advances, however, traveling becomes unpredictable as the person becomes more confusing. Plan for a trip by gathering important documents: insurance cards, passports, your physician's phone number, refills on medications and a copy of medical records in case the person with dementia needs to see a physician while away.

Make sure you keep track of all the documents and medications. Packing them in carry-on bags so they will not get lost enroute is a good idea. Remember to bring sufficient funds or a credit card with you in case you must change your plans suddenly and return home. Also, you may want to bring along a brief letter from your physician to the airline or hotel to expedite a change in plans.



want to remain on the bus so the person can take a nap instead of visiting all the sights.

Remember the person who is at risk of wandering when at home may also do so in an unfamiliar place. If this is the case with your loved one, try using an identity bracelet or necklace that clearly explains that she has a dementia illness. Put a card with the name and address of the hotel where you are staying in the person's pocket. You may want to carry a recent photo of the person in case she gets lost.

Traveling may also make the person more anxious. Bring along an anti-anxiety medicine just in case. Toileting is an issue that requires some forethought when you are traveling. If you are driving, stop at the rest area toilets every couple of hours. If the person needs assistance in the bathroom and you may be in there for a while, bring along an "OCCUPIED" sign for the washroom door. Have on hand a full change of clothing. Be sure to keep the way to the toilet well-lit in hotel rooms, and keep a light turned on at night in the bathroom.

A few more travel tips to keep in mind: If you are traveling by car, never leave your loved one with dementia alone in the car. Try to bring along a relative or friend to share with in the driving. And if you are traveling by plane, you may want to notify the airline ahead of time, so you can ask for any assistance.

Source: *Manual of Caregivers* by Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center



## Quotes

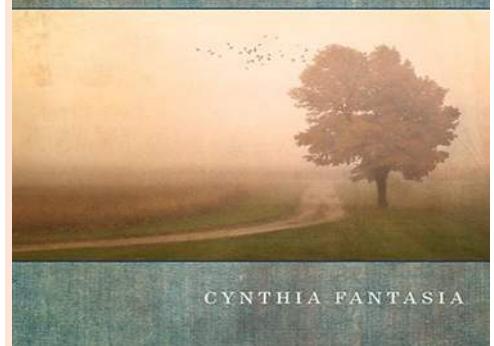
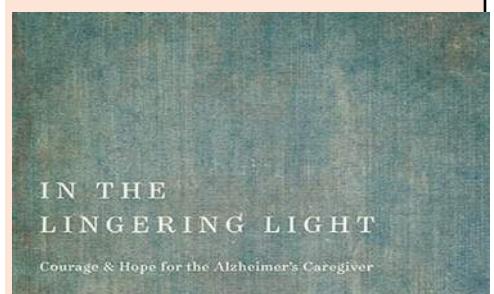
- ◆ Summer means happy times and good sunshine. - Brian Wilson
- ◆ Sun is shining, weather is sweet. Make you want to move your dancing feet. - Bob Marley
- ◆ Wherever you go, always bring your own sunshine.

## May-June Website

[www.aarp.org/aarp/caregivers](http://www.aarp.org/aarp/caregivers)

## This Month's Book

*In the Lingering Light* is a valuable field guide for Alzheimer's caregivers, written by one who has gone before you. Cynthia Fantasia packs courage and faith to help sustain you on the uncertain road ahead.



# Alcohol and Medicines—a dangerous mix

Many medicines—prescription, over the counter, or herbal remedies—can be dangerous or even deadly when mixed with alcohol. Many older people take medications every day, making this a special worry.

Before taking any medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist if you can safely drink alcohol. Here are some examples of problems caused by mixing alcohol with some medicines:

- ◆ If you take aspirin and drink, your risk of stomach or intestinal bleeding is increased.
- ◆ When combined with alcohol, cold and allergy medicines (the label will say "antihistamines") may make you feel very sleepy.
- ◆ Alcohol used with large doses of acetaminophen, a common painkiller, may cause liver damage.
- ◆ Some medicines, such as cough syrups and laxatives, have high alcohol content. If you drink at the same time, your alcohol level will go up.
- ◆ Alcohol used with some sleeping pills, pain pills, or anxiety/anti-depression medicine can be deadly.

Mixing alcohol and medicines can be harmful. Alcohol, like some medicines, can make you sleepy, drowsy, or lightheaded. Drinking alcohol while taking medicine can intensify these effects. You may have trouble concentrating or performing mechanical skills. Small amounts of alcohol can make it dangerous to drive, and when you mix alcohol with certain medicines you put yourself at even greater risk. Combining alcohol with some medicines can lead to falls and serious injuries, especially among older people.

## Medicines may have many ingredients

Some medications—including many popular painkillers and cough, cold, and allergy remedies—contain more than one ingredient that can react with alcohol. Read the label on the medication bottle to find out exactly what ingredients a medicine contains. Ask your pharmacist if you have any questions about how alcohol might interact with a drug you are taking.

## Some medicines contain alcohol

Certain medicines contain up to 10 percent alcohol. Cough syrup and laxatives may have some of the highest alcohol concentrations.



## Alcohol affects women differently

Women, in general, have a higher risk for problems than men. When a woman drinks, the alcohol in her bloodstream typically reaches a higher level than a man's even if both are drinking the same amount. This is because women's bodies generally have less water than men's bodies. Because alcohol mixes with body water, a given amount of alcohol is more concentrated in a woman's body than in a man's. As a result, women are more susceptible to alcohol-related damage to organs such as the liver.

## Older people face greater risk

Older people are at particularly high risk for harmful alcohol-medication interactions. Aging slows the body's ability to break down alcohol, so alcohol remains in a person's system longer. Older people also are more likely to take a medication that interacts with alcohol—in fact, they often need to take more than one of these medications.

## Timing is important

Alcohol and medicines can interact harmfully even if they are not taken at the same time.

## Remember...

Mixing alcohol and medicines puts you at risk for dangerous reactions. Protect yourself by avoiding alcohol if you are taking medication and don't know its effect. To learn more about medicine and whether it will interact with alcohol, talk to your pharmacist or other health care provider.

*Source: National Institute on Aging and National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*

# What is needed to be an effective caregiver?

What is needed to be an effective caregiver? This is an important question because caregiving is an essential role and has consequences for the care recipient and the caregiver. It takes a lot of time and energy, and most caregivers want to be certain their time isn't wasted. Time spent caring for another is time that the caregiver could spend in any number of other ways. If they spend it in the role of caregiver, then they want to be an effective caregiver.

It is common to hear people say that caregivers need training, that there should be a manual about how to be a good caregiver. While training and information are important aspects of being an effective caregiver, it is not the most important factor. The two elements to caring that form an essential basis to effective caregiving is **patience and understanding**.

Whether you care for someone young who has a debilitating physical illness or someone with an advanced dementia, the need for patience is foremost. The person you care for can sense when you are in a rush. Your body language reveals that you have a laundry list of tasks to accomplish and standing by the side of your loved one while waiting for them to accomplish a task that you could have done yourself in seconds is a challenge to your patience. It is also a challenge to the person you're caring for. It is very difficult to take a first step when feeling the pressure of the person beside you to just "get it over with".

How can you increase your patience? Planning is an important part of **patience**. Things done on the spur of the moment or crammed in between a dozen other tasks will always feel rushed to you and your loved one. Regularity in your plans makes it more likely that the task at hand will get done consistently with less stress. Try to ensure you get enough rest each day. You cannot ever catch up on rest. The body does not work that way. You need to replenish your energy daily as needed. Some caregivers find that the best rest comes when the person you care for is napping. Do not use their nap time to catch up on your work. If there truly are not enough hours in the day to complete the caregiving tasks and all the other things on your plate, you need to get something off your plate. Learn to ask for help. Hire people for some things when needed. Modify your self-imposed standards of performance. Caregiving does not last forever, and you do not want to be the person feeling trapped, unable to live your own life because you are caring for another.



Once you set yourself up correctly to be able to be patient, you need to develop **understanding**. Understanding comes in two important forms as related to caregiving. First understanding the condition, you loved has. Make sure you really know what the illness/issue is and typical progression of the condition. Determine realistically where on the continuum of progression your relative falls. Making ten-year plans for a person with a diagnosis typically lasting 3-6 months is a waste of time and energy. Be realistic, live in the moment, but be aware that some conditions are very long term and there may be several modifications needed to any caregiving plan as the condition progresses.

Second, understand the behavioral changes that typically occur in someone in similar situations as your relative. There are typical behavior patterns with all caregiving situations and the sooner you are aware of what behavioral/emotional challenges your loved one is facing, the better prepared you are to be understanding and supportive. You will be less likely to misinterpret actions and words, which can frequently become a source of misunderstanding, hurt feelings and tension in the caregiving relationship. Caregiver support groups are an invaluable means of gaining increased understanding from people who have been in your shoes, but a few steps ahead of you. Learn from their experiences.

If you approach your role with a positive mindset, understanding the illness and typical behaviors, and you are rested and supported as a caregiver, you may find it to be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life.

# The dangers of ignoring cataract symptoms

The American Academy of Ophthalmology urges seniors and their caregivers not to ignore the symptoms of cataracts, a leading cause of visual impairment that will affect more than half of all Americans by the time they are 80 years old. Delaying diagnosis and treatment of age-related cataracts can increase seniors' risk of permanent blindness and can lead to physical and psychological damage.

Cataracts are caused by the cloudy lens of the eye and are most common among older adults as the condition develops as the eye ages. Many seniors cope with cataracts — accepting vision loss as an inevitable part of the aging process rather than seeking medical treatment. Due to the incapacitation caused by blurred vision, leaving cataracts undiagnosed and untreated can lead to physical danger such as injuries from falls or running into unseen objects, as well as psychological harm like depression and social isolation. In addition, the longer advanced forms of cataracts are left untreated, the more difficult it can be to successfully repair the damage caused to the eye.

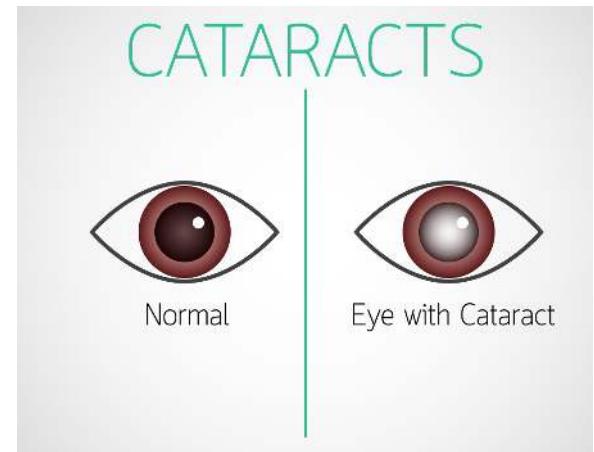
Adults aged 65 and older should have regular eye exams to monitor for the development of cataracts, in addition to other common eye conditions and diseases, such as age-related macular degeneration and glaucoma. People with diabetes, a family history of cataracts, and those who smoke tobacco are at an increased risk of developing cataracts. Common symptoms such as dull, blurry vision, colors appearing less vibrant, and halos around lights may begin to be noticeable as cataracts develop.

Cataracts are nearly always treatable with surgery, but it may not be necessary until performing daily activities becomes difficult. If daily life isn't disturbed, a change in a person's eyeglass prescription may be all that is necessary until visual impairment becomes more severe. If completing everyday tasks is challenging, cataract surgery should be discussed with an

ophthalmologist — a medical doctor specializing in the diagnosis, medical and surgical treatment of eye diseases and conditions.

"Seniors who find themselves giving up normal tasks like reading, exercising or driving due to cataract symptoms should know that they do not need to suffer in silence," said Rebecca Taylor, M.D., spokesperson for the American Academy of Ophthalmology. "Cataract surgery can help these individuals regain their sight and their independence. It is one of the most common and safest procedures performed in medicine, so seniors should not resist seeking help. Getting treatment can vastly improve your quality of life."

Sources: Eyecare America/ American Academy of Ophthalmology



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# The value of true friendship

by Marlene Pyle

I've learned many things since I began taking care of my 85-year-old grandmother. I know which supermarkets offer senior citizens discounts on which days of the week. I know which drugstore has the most helpful pharmacist, and which beautician will fix my grandmother's hair just the way she likes it. But one of the most important things I've learned isn't about caring for my grandmother; it's about caring for myself. I've learned the value of true friendship.



When my grandmother moved here to Georgia from her home state of Michigan to be nearer to me, I knew my busy life was about to get busier and more chaotic. I have a full-time job, two teenagers and (thankfully) a very supportive husband. My plate was already full.

I had long since given up on finding the time to do volunteer work, appeasing my pangs of guilt by donating clothing to my local battered women's shelter and writing a yearly check to the American Cancer Society. I quit making excuses for not getting to the gym and finally let my membership lapse. I made peace with the fact that my house may not always be immaculate but is pretty clean most of the time. But one thing I always made time for was my girlfriends.

Going out to lunch with the girls was something I looked forward to. Our shopping trips and movie nights kept me sane. Even if we just met at the park for a quick walk, I always felt better and more relaxed after I'd spent time with them.

My grandmother's arrival changed things. It was difficult for me to make last-minute plans with my friends, and I often had to cancel even long-standing dates if my grandmother was ill or had an appointment that couldn't be rescheduled. I couldn't linger on the phone with my pals as often and leaving town for more than a day or two required elaborate arrangements and planning. For the first time in my life, I found myself buying greeting cards that read "Happy Belated Birthday." Weeks or even months would go by when the only contact I had with some of my friends was a hurried email.

But there was also Paula, who sat me with me in the dingy hospital waiting room while my grandmother had surgery, and who spent an entire Saturday helping me paint my grandmother's bedroom the perfect shade of yellow.

There is Pam, who leaves funny messages on my voice mail, even though she knows I may not get to call her back for a while, and who volunteered to take my grandmother to an appointment when I had a meeting I absolutely couldn't miss. What would I do without them? I don't even want to know. As the song goes, I get by with a little help from my friends.

My grandmother's taught me a lot over the years. My friends have taught me even more.



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