

Alzheimer's and dementia care: Tips for daily tasks

Alzheimer's and dementia caregiving takes patience and flexibility. To reduce frustration, consider these tips for daily tasks – from limiting choices to creating a safe environment.

If you are caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia, your role in managing daily tasks will increase as the disease progresses. Consider practical tips that can help the person with dementia participate as much as possible and enable you to manage tasks effectively.

Reduce frustrations

A person with dementia might become agitated when once-simple tasks become difficult. To limit challenges and ease frustration:

- **Schedule wisely.** Establish a daily routine. Some tasks, such as bathing or medical appointments, are easier when the person is most alert and refreshed. Allow some flexibility for spontaneous activities or particularly difficult days.
- **Take your time.** Anticipate that tasks may take longer than they used to and schedule more time for them. Allow time for breaks during tasks.
- **Involve the person.** Allow the person with dementia to do as much as possible with the least amount of assistance. For example, he or she might be able to set the table with the help of visual cues or dress independently if you lay out clothes in the order they go on.
- **Provide choices.** Provide some, but not too many, choices every day. For example, provide two outfits to choose from, ask if he or she prefers a hot or cold beverage, or ask if he or she would rather go for a walk or see a movie.
- **Provide simple instructions.** People with dementia best understand clear, one-step communication.
- **Limit napping.** Avoid multiple or prolonged naps during the day. This can minimize the risk of getting days and nights reversed.
- **Reduce distractions.** Turn off the TV and minimize other distractions at mealtime and during conversations to make it easier for the person with dementia to focus.

Be flexible

Over time, a person with dementia will become more dependent. To reduce frustration, stay flexible and adapt your routine and expectations as needed.

For example, if he or she wants to wear the same outfit every day, consider buying a few identical outfits. If bathing is met with resistance, consider doing it less often.

Create a safe environment

Dementia impairs judgment and problem-solving skills, increasing a person's risk of injury. To promote safety:

- **Prevent falls.** Avoid scatter rugs, extension cords and any clutter that could cause falls. Install handrails or grab bars in critical areas.

- **Use locks.** Install locks on cabinets that contain anything potentially dangerous, such as medicine, alcohol, guns, toxic cleaning substances, dangerous utensils and tools.
- **Check water temperature.** Lower the thermostat on the hot-water heater to prevent burns.
- **Take fire safety precautions.** Keep matches and lighters out of reach. If the person with dementia smokes, always supervise smoking. Make sure a fire extinguisher is accessible and the smoke and carbon monoxide detectors have fresh batteries.

Focus on individualized care

Each person with Alzheimer's disease will experience its symptoms and progression differently. Tailor these practical tips to your family member's needs.

Patience and flexibility — along with self-care and the support of friends and family — can help you deal with the challenges and frustrations ahead.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

References:

1. Activities. Alzheimer's Association. <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/activities>. Accessed April 22, 2019.
2. Bathing. Alzheimer's Association. <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/bathing>. Accessed April 22, 2019.
3. Dressing and grooming. Alzheimer's Association. <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/dressing-grooming>. Accessed April 22, 2019.
4. Home safety and Alzheimer's disease. National Institute on Aging. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/home-safety-and-alzheimers-disease>. Accessed April 22, 2019.
5. Mace NL, et al. *The 36-Hour Day*. 6th ed. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press; 2017.
6. Creating a daily plan. Alzheimer's Association. <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/daily-care-plan>. Accessed April 22, 2019.
7. Graff-Radford J (expert opinion). Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn. April 24, 2019.

Caregiver Depression

Many caregivers experience depression. If you are experiencing symptoms, know that you aren't alone and that help is available. Depression is a serious condition, but one that is treatable.

Symptoms of depression

Caregiving is hard — and can lead to feelings of stress, guilt, anger, sadness, isolation — and depression. Depression affects different people in different ways and at different times. For example, someone may experience depression right after their family member has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Other caregivers may experience it as Alzheimer's progresses and the cognitive abilities of the person with Alzheimer's diminish.

Signs and symptoms of depression include:

- Becoming easily agitated or frustrated
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Thoughts of death, dying or suicide
- Disturbed sleep
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities
- Difficulty thinking or concentrating
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and pain

Source: American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

See your doctor

If you are concerned that you might be depressed, see your doctor as soon as possible. Certain medications and some medical conditions can cause the same symptoms as depression. A doctor can rule out these possibilities by doing a medical exam and lab tests.

If depression is left untreated, it can lead to emotional and physical problems. It can also affect the quality of care you're able to provide the person with Alzheimer's or dementia.

Treatment

Depression can be effectively treated. And the earlier treatment begins, the earlier you'll feel better. Treatment commonly involves a combination of medication, therapy and support.

Medication

Feeling better takes time. If you are prescribed an antidepressant, talk with your doctor about how long it will take to feel the full benefit. In some cases, it may take six to eight weeks. Never stop taking an antidepressant without consulting your doctor first. Abruptly stopping antidepressants can cause unwanted side effects.

Counseling

Your doctor may refer you to a mental health professional, such as a counselor, psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker. Counseling can be very effective in the treatment of depression, and can help you deal with the problems you are facing. It's important to be comfortable with the professional you seek treatment with, so consider interviewing several to find a good fit. Your primary care physician, insurance provider or community mental health clinic may be able to provide referrals.

Coping

In addition to seeking help from a professional, you can take steps to help yourself.

- **Let family and friends help you.**
Take others up on offers to help and ask for help when you need it
- **Seek out caregiver support.**

Consider respite services, a local caregiver support group or our online community. Building a support network can keep you from feeling isolated.

- **Try journaling.**
Expressing your emotions (both negative and positive) in a journal may boost your mood.
- **Learn ways to relax and manage stress.**
Try meditation or yoga to help reduce caregiver stress.
- **Take time for yourself.**
Participate in activities that you enjoy.

Grief and Loss as Alzheimer's Progresses

It is common for caregivers to have feelings of loss and grief as their life is changed by Alzheimer's. You are entitled to these emotions and may start to experience them as soon as you learn of the diagnosis. Share your feelings and seek support as you go through this process.

Feelings of grief

It's normal to feel loss when you care about someone who has Alzheimer's disease. It's also normal to feel guilty, abandoned and angry.

Alzheimer's gradually takes away the person you know and love. As this happens, you will mourn him or her and may experience the different phases of grieving: denial, anger, guilt, sadness and acceptance. The stages of grief don't happen neatly in order. You may move in and out of different stages as time goes on.

Some common experiences in the grieving process include:

Denial

- Hoping that the person is not ill
- Expecting the person to get better
- Convincing yourself that the person has not changed
- Attempting to normalize problematic behaviors

Anger

- Being frustrated with the person
- Resenting the demands of caregiving
- Resenting family members who cannot or will not help provide care
- Feeling abandoned

Guilt

- Having unrealistic expectations with thoughts like: "I should have done ..." "I must do everything for him or her" or "I must visit him or her every day"
- Feeling bad because you are still able to enjoy life
- Feeling that you have failed if, for example, you cannot care for the person at home
- Having negative thoughts about the person or wishing that he or she would go away or die
- Regretting things about your relationship before the diagnosis

Sadness

- Feeling overwhelmed by loss
- Crying frequently
- Withdrawing from social activities or needing to connect more frequently with others
- Withholding your emotions or displaying them more openly than usual

Acceptance

- Learning to live in the moment
- Finding personal meaning in caring for someone who is terminally ill
- Understanding how the grieving process affects your life
- Appreciating the personal growth that comes from surviving loss
- Finding your sense of humor
- Asking for and accepting help from others

Ways to cope with grief and loss

- **Face your feelings.**
Think about all of your feelings — positive and negative. Let yourself be as sad as you want, and accept feelings of guilt because they are normal. Work through your anger and frustration. These are healthy emotions. Know that it is common to feel conflicting emotions. It is okay to feel love and anger at the same time.
- **Prepare to experience feelings of loss more than once.**
As dementia progresses, it is common to go through feelings of grief and loss again. Accept and acknowledge your feelings. They are a normal part of the grieving process.
- **Claim the grieving process as your own.**
No two people experience grief the same way. Grief hits different people at different times; some people need more time to grieve than others. Your experience will depend on the severity and duration of the person's illness, on your own history of loss and on the nature of your relationship with the person who has Alzheimer's.

Everyone grieves differently and at their own pace. If your grief is so intense that your well-being is at risk, ask for help from your doctor or a professional counselor.

- **Talk with someone.**
Talk with someone you trust about your grief, guilt and anger. If you decide to

meet with a therapist who specializes in grief counseling, interview several so you can choose one you are comfortable with.

- **Combat feelings of isolation and loneliness.**

Caregivers often give up enjoyable activities and companionship. Make a lunch or movie date with friends. Taking a break may help you relieve stress and grief, and strengthen your support network. Stay involved in activities that you enjoy.

- **Join a support group.**

When you talk with other caregivers, share your emotions. Cry and laugh together. Do not limit conversations to caregiving tips. Alzheimer's Association support groups take place all across the country. Find one near you. If you prefer online support, join ALZConnected, our online caregiver community with message boards.

- **Know that some people may not understand your grief.**

Most people think grief happens when someone dies. They may not know that it is possible to grieve deeply for someone who has a progressive cognitive illness.

- **Accept yourself.**

Think about what you expect from yourself. Is it realistic? Learn to accept the things that are beyond your control. Make responsible decisions about the things you can control.

- **Take care of yourself.**

The best thing you can do for the person you are caring for is to stay healthy. This includes taking care of your physical, mental and emotional well-being. Create balance in your life. Do things that bring joy and comfort, and give yourself time to rest. Ask for help when you need it, and accept the help that is offered.

Alzheimer's Foundation of America
322 Eight Ave., 16th Floor
New York, NY 10001
1-866-232-8484
info@alzfdn.org

Memory and Alzheimer's Center
Office and Clinic
UofL Physicians - Neurology
401 E. Chestnut St.
Suite 510
Louisville, Kentucky 40202
502-588-4800

Hospital Affiliations
University of Louisville Hospital
