

How to be a Friend to Someone with a Dementia?

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Dementias such as Alzheimer's disease affect the individual, their family and friends. It is sometimes painful to see someone you knew at an earlier part of life fail to remember or process information logically and rationally. This is especially hard when you know the person was brilliant and full of joy before the disease started to affect their daily living.

Occasionally friends shy away and start to not include the person with a dementia in invitations – sometimes because they don't want a "scene" or thinks the person will forget to come anyway. If the friend exhibiting signs of a dementia is married this means the well spouse also starts to feel rejected and this could add to depression and social isolation for the couple.

How then can you continue to be a friend to someone who has an organic dementia? The first action would be to learn something about the process your friend is experiencing. That means attending classes in the community that explain the process to give families and friends tools to use in communicating with someone who is challenged with impaired memory or other cognitive processes.

As memory becomes more impaired the "moment" becomes more important to those with dementias. This means that your invitation to take a walk, visit a beautiful public garden or art gallery might be well received because the only expectation is to view and enjoy – the individual will not be challenged in passive experiences that rely on memory to participate. Taking someone to a drama or film that requires short-term memory to follow the thread of the story could cause anxiety or increase confusion.

However, sometimes nature films and pure musicals (the old ones) can bring pleasure. If you do bring someone with a dementia to a live performance or concert you might think of leaving at intermission especially if you see they are restless. If you do leave early make an excuse about yourself. Always protect their self-esteem. Or just leave and say it is time to get ice cream.

Going out for a meal can be a nice "in the moment" experience. However, don't give someone with dementia the menu-choices are very difficult for those with dementias. Instead say, "lets go out for a nice Cob Salad or let's get some spaghetti tonight." That way when you arrive you just say to the waitress, "we have decided what we want we don't need a menu!" If you do give them a menu make some suggestions that you know they like and say something like, "I am going to have a ½ tuna salad and the soup of the day, would you like that too?" It is important to protect self-esteem and not leave your friend feeling that they are a failure. The more you pre-plan your event the more likely everyone feels good about the time spent together.

Learning how to communicate with someone with a dementia is an art and often very challenging for those who are concrete in their thinking and used to giving full explanations and rationalizing. This is why we suggest taking classes and learning the important tools in order to be as supportive possible as you change the way you communicate. Explaining a concept ten times to someone only increases their sense of failure. Keeping information simple and reducing choices will allow you both to enjoy the moment.

Without a memory you don't have the past and you are not engaged in the future you only have the moment. For the individual experiencing memory loss that can mean they are not experiencing guilt of the past or anxiety of the future. When we are in the moment we are most present for ourselves and others – this is a wonderful lesson that contributes to life satisfaction and can be taught to us by those experiencing this challenging journey.

Eldercare Services has no fee classes in our Tice Valley office designed for families but very appropriate for friends (visit www.EldercareAnswers.com to see our list of upcoming classes). The Alzheimer's Association also has many classes. Learning in fact contributes to dementia prevention – so take a class, learn to be a friend who can be “in the moment”. Call our office and ask for the Dementia Series class flyers -937-2018.