

Emergency situations, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, present special challenges to those caring for a loved one with dementia. Your typical routine is likely disrupted, and the programs and services you may utilize (like adult day care or senior centers) may be inaccessible. You may have difficulty structuring the day, and stress may be high for everyone at home. Disruptions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak may increase the need for caregiver assistance, so during this time when respite may be limited, it is important to incorporate time for caregivers to get a break. Consider the following tips:

Structuring the day

A person with Alzheimer's or other progressive dementia will eventually need a caregiver's assistance to organize and navigate the day. The amount of assistance needed depends on the degree of cognitive impairment. Structured and pleasant meaningful activities support a sense of purpose, reduce agitation, and improve mood. Planning activities and structuring a day with a person with dementia works best when you continually explore, experiment and adjust.

Sample Daily Plan

| Morning | Afternoon | Evening |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Wash, brush teeth, get dressed ✓ Prepare and eat breakfast ✓ Have a conversation over coffee ✓ Discuss the newspaper, try a craft project, reminisce about old photos ✓ Take a break, have some quiet time ✓ Do some chores together ✓ Take a walk, play a game | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Prepare and eat lunch ✓ Read mail, wash dishes ✓ Listen to music, do crossword puzzles, watch TV ✓ Do some gardening, bake, take a walk, call a friend ✓ Take a short break or nap | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Prepare and eat dinner, clean up the kitchen ✓ Reminisce over coffee and dessert ✓ Play cards, watch a movie, give a massage ✓ Take a bath, get ready for bed, read a book |

Choosing Activities

Planning activities for a person with dementia works best when you continually explore, experiment and adjust. In general, if the person seems bored or irritable, it may be time to introduce another activity or to take time out for rest. The type of activity and how well it is completed are not as important as the engagement and sense of purpose the person gets from doing it.

(Continued)

Choosing Activities

- ✓ Keep the person's skills and abilities in mind. Start with activities the person has always enjoyed and adjust to match their current abilities.
- ✓ Pay special attention to what the person enjoys. Take note when the person seems happy, anxious, distracted or irritable. For example, some people enjoy watching the news, while others may be frightened or confused by the content or the noise.
- ✓ Relate activities to everyday life and former work.
 - ✓ A former office worker might enjoy activities that involve organizing, like putting coins in a holder, helping to assemble a mailing or making a to-do list.
 - ✓ Involving your loved one in daily household tasks may feel more meaningful and engaging than coming up with something brand new.
- ✓ Look for favorites. The person who always enjoyed drinking coffee and reading the newspaper may still find these activities enjoyable, even if he or she is not able to completely understand what the newspaper says.

Getting Through the Day with Less Stress: Your Approach

| Challenge | Strategies to try |
|--|--|
| Your loved one is unable to remember to wash his or her hands | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ People living with dementia may need extra and/or written reminders and support to remember to wash hands. ✓ Try washing your hands side-by-side, demonstrating thorough hand-washing and assisting with any difficulties getting through the task. ✓ To help keep the person engaged, try singing a loved song, use a special scented soap, and finish with a hand cream. |
| Your loved one is asking to go out, and does not understand restrictions due to physical distancing measures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Depending on their ability to understand and remember information that you share, it may be very confusing, upsetting, and not helpful to be retold the details of COVID-19 several times. |

Getting Through the Day with Less Stress: Your Approach

| Challenge | Strategies to try |
|--|---|
| Your loved one is asking to go out, and does not understand restrictions due to physical distancing measures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Instead, respond to questions in whatever way will be most comfortable and easy to understand in the moment, then redirect to another activity. ✓ You might explain the basic facts, or you might say something reassuring, even if not entirely true or factual, like “The coffee shop is closed for renovations, let’s make a fresh pot here!” |
| Your loved one is overwhelmed with too many choices, and has trouble identifying what they would like to do to fill their time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Provide a manageable choice, or gently tell the person what’s next instead of asking. ✓ Instead of “What would you like to do this afternoon?” try “Would you rather watch TV or look at the paper?” or “It’s time for our favorite show!” |
| Your loved one is having trouble organizing, planning, initiating and successfully completing tasks. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Help them get started. Set up materials, a clear place to be and steps to take, and provide a prompt. ✓ Instead of: “Can you set the table?” Try “It’s time for lunch. Here you go, would you place these napkins on the table?” |
| Your loved one is having trouble sticking with tasks; they may become distracted or overwhelmed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Break tasks down into smaller steps and provide one simple instruction at a time. ✓ You may need to provide support and supervision to repeat instructions, to redirect back to the task at hand, do the task alongside them, or show them how to do it. |

Getting Through the Day with Less Stress: Your Approach

| Challenge | Strategies to try |
|---|---|
| Your loved one seems to have lost interest in activities or tasks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Let the individual know he or she is needed. Ask them for help (even if you don't really need it!) and express your gratitude. ✓ Make the connection. If you ask the person to make a card, he or she may not respond. But, if you invite them to work on a get-well card to send to a friend, the person may enjoy working on this meaningful task. ✓ Involve the person through conversation. While you're polishing shoes, washing the car or cooking dinner, talk to the person about what you're doing, or use it as a jumping-off point for reminiscing. "You always made the best sauce; I remember Sundays at our house so well..." |
| Your loved one is getting frustrated during activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Be flexible and refrain from correcting and criticizing. If the person insists on doing something a different way, let it happen, and change it later if necessary. ✓ Try again later. If something isn't working, it may just be the wrong time of day or the activity may be too complicated. Try again later, or adapt the activity. ✓ Focus on enjoyment, not achievement. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Find activities that build on remaining skills and interests. ✓ A person may be able to rake leaves or sweep a walkway even if they can no longer mow the lawn, a person may be able to stir ingredients for a recipe while you measure. ✓ Even if not done correctly or completely, if your loved one feels involved and engaged, the task is a success! |

Getting Through the Day with Less Stress: Caregiver Breaks

You may have few windows of time for self-care. In order to take advantage of the time you have it is helpful to have a flexible plan for your breaks. For some people, calling a friend or family member would be most helpful, and for others, alone time with music or a book would work best.

What constitutes self-care is personal and unique to each individual! Ask yourself:

- ✓ What leaves you feeling depleted, cranky, anxious or sad?
- ✓ What leaves you feeling at ease, comforts you, and re-energizes you?
- ✓ Are there times of day that are more difficult than others?

Tips for incorporating caregiver breaks during a day at home with a person with dementia:

- ✓ Be compassionate with yourself during this unplanned and unprecedented time; it's ok to allow your loved one to sleep in, watch some extra TV, or have another dessert. Relinquish perfection in order to keep some gas in your tank.
- ✓ Schedule phone calls or video meetings for your loved one with dementia during strategic times during the day. While they are safe and occupied on the phone, you can take a break or complete important tasks.
- ✓ Try a change of scenery: take a drive, or sit outside on the porch.
- ✓ Instead of centering all the day's activities around your loved one's preferences, incorporate your favorite self-care activities and do them together. Baking, chair yoga, time with a pet, and cooking your favorite food may all be possible to enjoy together.

HELPFUL LINKS

[COVID-19 Caregiver Tips](#)

[50 Activities Ideas](#)

[Managing Caregiver Stress](#)

[24/7 Helpline: 800.272.3900](#)

All information provided by the Alzheimer's Association Massachusetts/New Hampshire Chapter

**Our 24/7 Helpline is available for around-the-clock
care and support at 800.272.3900**