



Journey through *Memory Care*

EDUCATIONAL SERIES

How to Deal with an Alzheimer's Diagnosis

Receiving a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia is never easy - it's life changing for the individual affected as well as his or her family and friends. Below are some tips and information for communicating with a loved one that has received a recent diagnosis, along with some ways for family members and other loved ones to cope with impending changes.

For those facing the disease.

They may be grieving over the present losses they are experiencing, or the expectation of future changes as the disease progresses. It can be helpful to identify and understand some of the emotions they may experience:

- **Anger.** Life is taking a different course than the one they and your family had planned. No one can control the course of the disease.
- **Relief.** The changes your loved one was experiencing were cause for concern. A diagnosis validated these concerns by assigning a name to those symptoms.
- **Denial.** The diagnosis seems impossible to believe. He or she may feel overwhelmed by how life will change as a result of Alzheimer's.
- **Depression.** Feeling sad or hopeless about the way life is changing.
- **Resentment.** Asking what he or she did to deserve this diagnosis or why this is happening to them and not someone else.
- **Fear.** Your loved one may be fearful of the future and how your family will be affected.
- **Isolation.** Feeling as if no one understands what they're going through or lose interest in maintaining relationships with others.
- **Sense of loss.** It may be difficult to accept changes in their abilities.

If these feelings linger week after week, your loved one may be dealing with depression or anxiety. Feeling depressed or anxious about an Alzheimer's diagnosis is common, but both can be successfully treated.

For the loved ones standing by their side.

You may see things changing and notice your loved one losing the ability to do what they once could. Often we're reluctant to step in and take over as it may feel like we're giving up on the person or crushing their dignity. Yet, it can be heart wrenching to watch them struggle. We want desperately for things to stay static and for the person (and us) to maintain independence.

Here's the reality though - most people diagnosed with Alzheimer's lose some ability early on to sequence or plan out activity, to organize, initiate and monitor actions.

Here's a simple example, think about the steps involved in fixing a meal: deciding what to make, identifying ingredients, putting the items or recipe together in a particular order, concentrating and often multitasking. **Preparing a meal or following a recipe that includes several steps is difficult and sometimes unachievable even in early dementia due to changes in the brain that are responsible for processing.**

Those with Alzheimer's aren't choosing to give up activities of daily living such as fixing meals, managing finances or driving. They wouldn't choose to forgo their independence, and they aren't lazy or unmotivated. The truth is, people with Alzheimer's can't "just try harder" and it's not realistic to expect them to do all they used to do.

Be prepared - some family members will still not get it.

Quite possibly they're in denial. From time to time, we're all in denial about various aspects of our life. It's how we cope - denial masks emotions of grief, loss, fear and uncertainty. Do your best to be kind, gentle and calm in approaching a family member in denial. Choosing to operate from a place of acceptance is a form of self-care.

For those times when emotions get the best of us.

Everyone's reality is a bit different; we all experience emotions differently and deal with stress, frustration and conflict in our own ways. Facing an Alzheimer's diagnosis can be devastating to not only your loved one but your entire family and support system.

Here are some tips to minimize family conflicts and unite to face this challenge together:

- **Share Responsibility.** Consider each family member's preferences, resources and abilities. Allow each person to offer up their strengths, such as providing hands-on care or managing household chores and errands. Not everyone will be comfortable in all roles, but remember that most family members want to help in their own way.

- **Meet regularly.** Plan regular face-to-face meetings and discuss each person's responsibilities and challenges. Remember that you are here to provide a support system not only to your loved one suffering from Alzheimer's but also to all those providing care and assistance.
- **Be honest.** Talk about your feelings openly, in a constructive manner. Be careful to express your feelings without blaming or shaming other family members and keep an open mind as you listen to others share their thoughts and feelings.
- **Don't criticize.** There are many "right" ways to provide care and remember that each caregiver has different styles, abilities and values. Avoid criticizing other family members; instead discuss positive experiences and moments of joy you're able to share with your loved one.
- **Consider counseling.** If you're concerned that the stress of dealing with Alzheimer's may tear your family apart, seek help sooner than later. Working through conflicts together can ensure you provide the best care for your loved one and enjoy your time together as much as possible.

Consider joining an Alzheimer's Support Group. Contact your local Edgewood community for more information.