CARING FOR A LOVED ONE WITH DEMENTIA OR ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE

You promised to take care of your parent or partner with Alzheimer’s disease, and now you’re wondering how you will survive this responsibility.

True, you love the person you care for, but some days you probably just want to scream.

Not only does caregiving take up much of your time, it’s tough to watch Alzheimer’s disease (AD) or another form of dementia change a person, a little bit at a time.

One day, he seems better, the next day, worse. As the disease progresses, his needs will grow.

**But, what about your needs?**

You may have been the patient’s daughter, wife, husband, partner or son, but now you have a totally different relationship.

From this point on, you will be challenged both physically and emotionally. But you also will reap the benefit of knowing you eased the journey of someone you love along the treacherous path of physical and mental decline.

**Expect changes in your relationship**

This job won’t be easy. No matter what your relationship was before—close or distant—the disease will change it.

AD alters more than memory. Personalities change, subtly or dramatically. Your loved one may change her appearance, her diet or even her name. Once quiet, she may begin to act out in public. If she was combative before, she may become passive now.

There will be days when you won’t recognize this person. He may do things that seem out of character.

If you are waiting for the real mother or uncle or wife to come forward, you may be disappointed. The sad reality is, as time goes by, you may find that person is gone forever. On the other hand, you may also find new reasons to love this person, as new aspects of personality emerge.

Above all, you need to reframe the relationship, anchoring it in the here and now. As your loved one loses the past, so must you. Cultivate new ways to connect, and build a new history in the time you have together, advises psychologist LeslieBeth Wish.

**Your own feelings may change**

Wish says no matter how much you care for the person, it’s nearly impossible to be the sole care provider for someone with dementia without experiencing some degree of anger, resentment or depression.

After all, we are only human, and when we watch someone or something wither and die—whether it is a pet, a job, an important relationship or a talent—we are saddened. We might also be frightened.

“When we’re frightened,” Wish says, “without our knowledge, we automatically call upon our defense mechanisms.”
You might go numb, withdraw your feelings or get angry, since anger is sometimes easier to express than sadness.

Although there is little you can do to change the course of the disease, you can work toward changing the dynamics of your relationship with a person with Alzheimer’s disease.

**Reframe your relationship**

1. **Expect your reactions to be both positive and negative.** We may want perfection from our parents and partners but if they have AD, we must learn to expect less. Accept your loved one as she is. Don’t be surprised if you are sometimes disappointed or aggravated by her actions. Be open to the possibility that you will come to appreciate your loved one in new and different ways during the course of your caregiving.

2. **Give yourself permission to cry or yell.** It’s not healthy to bury your distressing feelings, though it is usually inappropriate to express them to a person with dementia with whom you are upset or angry. Go outside and let off steam once in a while. That’s the normal and healthy thing to do, Wish says.

3. **Don’t work 24/7.** You can’t attend to a sick person’s every need. Set limits. Check on your mom every 15 or 30 minutes, or whatever works to keep her safe and attended. Do not demand of yourself the impossible task of constant observation.

4. **Let go of the past.** “Don’t think that turning your life over to an ill family member is necessarily going to fix a broken relationship,” Wish warns. “That often doesn’t happen.” You may have missed the opportunity to make amends or to say the things you’ve always wanted to say. Wish tells caregivers to write letters, make videos, or express their true feelings anyway, even if their loved one cannot fully understand. He will appreciate your undivided attention and you will be transformed as you reconnect with your past in a positive way. Use this method to give yourself the peace and strength you’ll need to move on to the future. Someday you’ll look back and be glad you didn’t let AD rob you of a healing moment.

5. **Strengthen your own social support network.** Now is a good time to enlist help from a therapist, clergy member, friend or partner.

6. **Deal with your own fears.** Don’t wall up your fears. Find a way to express them to yourself or others.

7. **Keep up your own physical health.** Exercise. Practice good eating habits. Take walks instead of fast-food breaks.

8. **Take advantage of available services.** Tap hospice or elder care services, volunteers, respite care, social service agencies and other supportive agencies. If you can’t afford to pay for help, barter something in exchange for a few hours of care.

9. **Budget your time and don’t be afraid to delegate.** Let people know what they can do to help, and when. Be resourceful. Want to exercise but can’t go to a gym? Buy a used treadmill and set it up where you can keep your eye on your loved one.

10. **Tell others about your situation without giving up privacy.** You might not want to tell your friends or co-workers every detail, but give them a heads up. Set limits and boundaries on your time and energy.

11. **Learn more about your relationship or family.** Put together a scrapbook of memories. Build a family tree. Find out as much as you can about your loved one’s past. Build positive connections while you strengthen your ties to family and widen your support network.

Source: LeslieBeth Wish, EdD, MSS, psychologist and licensed clinical social worker, Sarasota, FL.

By Paula Hartman Cohen

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FOSTERING YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

As a family psychologist for the past 35 years, I have talked with thousands of people who have wanted my help with relationship problems. There are many things that couples, friends and parents can do to strengthen their relationships.

RELATIONSHIP MISTAKES

The three biggest relationship mistakes people make are to:

- **allow friendships to fade.** I am amazed by the number of people I meet who live their lives without a circle of friends. To make matters worse, these folks often don't know what they are missing. All they know is that they are depressed and downhearted and have lost their spirit for living. Humans are social creatures. They do not do well when they are alone. People open to friendships enjoy a far richer and more meaningful life.

- **not nurture the love that brought them together as a couple.** Many people, after marrying or becoming a couple, do little to nurture their love for one another. There seems to be a common misconception that intimate relationships will thrive automatically without any effort.

- **bicker and argue over the raising of their children.** Parents have a special challenge in keeping their relationship with their spouse alive and well because parents experience a lot of disagreements about the parenting of their children. Burnout and anger can easily result and take their toll on couples with children.

To help avoid these mistakes, try some of these tips for fostering love between partners, parents and friends.

NURTURE FRIENDSHIPS

- **Be tolerant and patient.** You are not perfect and your friends will not be perfect, so don’t give up on a friend during the down times. No relationship can exist very long without apologizing, making up, forgetting and forgiving.

- **Make simple gestures** such as smiling, saying hello and calling up a buddy with plans for fun. They go a long way toward forming meaningful relationships. You can’t be passive about developing friendships; you must reach out to others.

- **Find one activity that you love so much you can’t wait to do it.** A whole new world of friendships can open up to you when you find an activity you have a passion for.

NURTURE YOUR LOVE AS A COUPLE

- **Surprise each other** every month with plans for having fun as a couple.

- **Make every birthday, anniversary and holiday a time to celebrate your relationship** with each other.

- **Become true partners in planning your future together,** because fulfilling your dreams nurtures the love that once brought you together.

- **Let your partner know as often as possible what you admire, respect and love about him,** just like you did when you first fell in love.

- **Encourage each other to grow as individuals.** This growth, in turn, will strengthen your union as a couple.

KEEP YOUR LOVE ALIVE WHILE RAISING CHILDREN

- **Resolve the differences you have as parents, either on your own or with professional help.** This will help you become a parenting team, and not competitors.

- **Become each other’s cheerleader** so the children hear from Dad what is so great about Mom and hear from Mom what is so special about Dad.
Keep in mind that there is no better way to live your life than to be a generous, loving person. When you are generous of heart and loving in spirit, all your relationships will flourish.

By Kenneth N. Condrell, PhD
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WHY FRIENDS MATTER: THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

"People who need people..." is more than just a phrase from a popular song. Having friends and outside interests can make a difference in living longer and healthier lives.

Everyone needs to feel loved and supported—especially as we grow older. As we age, friends truly can be lifesavers. The friend who brings the chicken soup makes as much difference in feeling better faster as the soup itself. Sharing with friends helps multiply the joys and divide the sorrows.

Large, extended families that were often available for support are now fewer. The number of one-person households has increased. People often move far from their families to work or retire. But staying connected to family, friends and activities has never been more important.

PROOF OF HEALTH BENEFITS

Several studies report fewer colds, lower blood pressure and lower heart rates in participants with strong social ties. Statistics show that marriage, perhaps the strongest tie, adds years to life expectancy. And suicide, mental illness and alcoholism rates are much lower when people feel a sense of belonging. Evidence of the benefits of social interactions was found in these studies:

- In one study, medical students who were assigned to work in pairs had lower stress levels than those who were assigned to work alone.
- Another study reported that elderly people who like to eat out, go to movies and take part in other social activities live an average of two and a half years longer than people who spend most of their time alone. The physical health benefits of socializing were equal to physical exercise, even though the social activities involved almost no physical exertion. It wasn't physical activity or physical health but feeling worthwhile that led to longer life.
- In one experiment, paid volunteers had a cold virus sprayed in their noses. The people with very few or no social contacts were four times more likely to come down with cold symptoms than those with lots of social contacts.

STAYING CONNECTED, FORMING NEW CONNECTIONS

Social networking sites, text messaging, e-mail, and video conferencing have allowed people to stay in touch with friends and relatives and even create relationships with people they haven’t met. These cyber-friends can provide support, involvement and encouragement. Perhaps people's need for connection explains the popularity of computers, even in aging populations. Grandparents of many ages feel great satisfaction in "logging on" to talk to their grandchildren.

Tutoring, mentoring, playing cards, walking, singing together, sitting and talking, having a student pen pal at a local school, going to the movies, joining a book discussion group, volunteering or working at a paid job are ways to become or stay involved. Friendship, love and support are lifelines to be shared. It’s never too soon to start building relationships.

By Ellen Gold
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GOOD HEALTH AND HABITS ARE CONTAGIOUS

Your mother was right. Choose your friends and associates wisely as their choices have a profound effect on you for better and for worse. And if you can’t choose the people in your life (such as relatives and co-workers!) then at least be aware of the subtle yet powerful influence their moods and lifestyle may have on you.

BEYOND PEER PRESSURE

A new theory about the power of social networks takes the concept of peer pressure a step further. Researchers Nicholas Christakis, MD, and James Fowler, PhD, have found that:

- certain moods such as loneliness can be contagious
- people exhibit “flocking behavior” when it comes to things such as drinking, smoking and overeating

But don’t despair—it’s not just the bad habits that spread. Good moods and decisions to do things such as stop smoking are also contagious. According to Christakis and Fowler, if one person in a small firm stops smoking, his or her co-workers with the habit have a 34 percent chance of quitting as well.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT—TO THREE DEGREES OF SEPARATION

What’s really “new” about this research is that it’s not just your best friend who can influence your moods and choices, but anyone in your wider circle stretching out three degrees. That means that a friend of a friend of a friend’s decision to stop smoking may influence you to stop smoking as information is shared along communication lines.

On a similar note, Sheldon Cohen, PhD, a leading expert on social networks and health at Carnegie Mellon University, has found that a person’s “natural networks” of family, friends, co-workers and community are more effective in influencing good health and habits than the help one might get from strangers in, for example, an issues-based support group.

According to Cohen’s co-researcher, Sarah Pressman, “Social ties are important to health, in part because they may encourage good health behaviors such as eating, sleeping and exercising well, and they may buffer the stress response to negative events.”

Cohen stresses, however, that it’s the quality of a person’s “social ties” that have the greatest impact. In an American Psychological Association address on the topic, Cohen said that if your relationships in your “natural network” are positive, then you will benefit more from those influences than you would from a support group of strangers, with one notable exception: If your relations with family and friends are prone to conflict, then you might do better with a group of strangers working on similar issues.

HOW TO BENEFIT FROM “NATURAL” SOCIAL NETWORKS

All this research is not an excuse to dump friends with flaws (unless they’re truly toxic). We all have our vices. Instead, the challenge is to build better relationships within your natural network and find something positive to do with friends that doesn’t involve unhealthy choices.

- **Make sure you have a strong social network.** Many studies, including those out of Carnegie Mellon University and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, show that people with friends and active social schedules live longer and enjoy better mental health.
- **Ask for advice.** Always wondered how a co-worker stays slim? People love to share their stories.
- **Exercise with friends.** Working out with a friend gives you a burst of endorphins similar to the “high” experienced when laughing or dancing with others, according to a University of Oxford study. You’re also more likely to stick to an exercise program if you do it with a friend, according to a University of Connecticut study.
- **Don’t ignore the influence of online friends.** Christakis and Fowler studied facebook.com and found lifestyle similarities among those who tagged pictures of each other.
• **Notice your habits and moods and try to understand their influences.** Gravitate toward those who instill healthy habits. Avoid negative people who consistently bring you down.

• **Plan substitute activities for problem behaviors such as smoking or overeating.** Instead of a group smoke break, take a walk with someone. Bring fruit to a meeting instead of doughnuts.

• **Pick up a new hobby or take classes** as a way to make new friends.

• **Celebrate lifestyle improvements with others.**

• **Remember that your choices also have an effect on others.** As Gandhi said: "Be the change you want to see in the world." And pass it on …


By Amy Fries
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### HOW TALKING HELPS

Since I am a psychologist, it is obvious to me how talking helps people. However, the benefits of talking are not apparent to many people. In fact, some folks are so negative about seeing a therapist that they openly say, “Talking is a waste of time.” But talking does help—whether you talk with a friend, a family member, a therapist or yourself!

**Talking is cathartic**

There are many experiences in life that at times leave us emotionally overwhelmed. At these times, we walk around feeling emotionally charged up and filled with tension. Frequently, what has happened to us cannot be changed, such as when someone we love dies, a tragic accident occurs or we have learned we have a terrible illness. When these experiences descend upon us, we feel emotionally frozen. We find ourselves stuck in a state of despair and pain. At these times, talking can help.

There is a word that captures how talking helps—catharsis. Talking leads to a catharsis, which means a feeling of relief. The charged feelings within us become less charged. Nothing has changed that caused the suffering in our lives, but talking has drained off some of the pain and this brings relief.

**It makes you feel better**

When I was a new counselor, I didn’t fully understand the power of talking. I would be surprised when people left my office saying, “I feel better now.” I would think to myself, “How could they feel better? I did nothing but listen.” Over the years I came to appreciate that listening to others is far from doing nothing. Listening gives people an opportunity to tell their story, and, in the telling, they find relief and a quieting of their emotions.

I have many stories of how people benefit from talking, but the story that follows is one I will never forget.

Years ago, a woman in her late 40s arrived in my office. She related that after a prolonged illness with cancer, her 21-year-old son died. I could see the despair and grief she was feeling. With tears in her eyes, she told me she could not talk to her husband or her daughter because they couldn’t bear to think about their loss. “I need to talk to someone,” she
said, “I need to tell someone about my son, how I cared for him during his illness and how he died.” I agreed to listen.

For the next two months, this mother arrived for her appointment each week. She started her story with her pregnancy and took me a step at a time through the life of her son. I listened. My eyes were focused on her and her feelings became my feelings. At times I smiled with her and at times my eyes, like her eyes, were filled with tears.

She ended her story by telling me how she spread her son’s ashes over her garden that she loved so much. When our last session ended, she stood up, grabbed my hand and thanked me for helping her. She was so appreciative. She left my office and I have never seen her again, but her story stays with me. Talking helped her.

**Talking leads to new solutions**

Talking helps in other ways, too. Many times when we talk with a friend, a family member or a therapist, we are stuck. We don’t know what to do. But as we talk, we hear ourselves express feelings and information that have not been expressed before. It is this experience of hearing ourselves that allows us at times to suddenly think of what to do. A solution pops into our mind.

In my practice, I ask people a lot of questions to keep them talking about what troubles them so they might discover their own solution. Very often, they are surprised how they suddenly think of how to solve the problem. It is not unusual for me to hear a statement such as, “You know, doctor, something I never thought of before just hit me.”

**Self-talk**

Believe it or not, talking to ourselves can be very beneficial. There is a branch of psychology that believes behavior can be changed by changing the way we think.

That’s why some therapists recommend self-talk to their clients as a strategy to help change the way they think. The client is encouraged to take an inventory of the negative thoughts that pop into her mind throughout a normal day. Then the therapist and client together work out a series of positive statements to counteract the negative statements. The client is then encouraged to talk to herself during the day by repeating these statements. It is a lot like re-programming a computer. Old thoughts that are counterproductive are erased and new thoughts that are positive and constructive are entered into the mind.

**Resource**

*Powerful Self-Talk, Change Your Self-Talk, Change Your Life* by Michael J. Russ. Audio CD.

By Kenneth N. Condrell, PhD

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