

# Caring for someone with Alzheimer's



Caring for someone with Alzheimer's can be a daunting and distressing task. As the person's condition deteriorates and his or her behaviour changes, you're faced with new and increasingly difficult challenges. Even everyday tasks, like bathing and getting dressed can become a source of great stress, and soon you'll find yourself wondering how you will get through the day.

To cope, you'll have to learn as much as you can about the disease and what to expect as it progresses. You will also need to build a support system of people who can help when you feel overwhelmed. You can prepare yourself by developing strategies for dealing with difficult behaviours and situations, and having a plan to get through the day.

## Dealing with the diagnosis

The first hurdle to overcome, is finding out that your loved one has Alzheimer's disease. Your initial reaction will probably be shock and disbelief. But soon you may be faced with feelings of anger, fear and uncertainty.

It's very important to learn as much as you can during this stage. Resources include:

- **Your doctor.** Ask your doctor any questions you may have about the disease, its progression, treatments available to alleviate the symptoms, and care-giving options. He will probably also be able to provide you with the names and/or numbers of support organisations in your area.
- **Alzheimer's organisations.** Contact Alzheimer's organisations and associations. They often provide very useful information about the disease and how to care for someone diagnosed with it. Some organisations even run care-giving, problem-solving and management workshops or classes.
- **Support groups.** Talking about your feelings and concerns with someone who is or has been in the same situation is a great comfort. Members often have helpful ideas or know of useful resources based on their own experiences.

Internet support groups are also available, but keep in mind that leaving the home and getting a break from the situation is valuable in itself.

- **Books.** Staying informed is an excellent way to reduce the stress of care-giving. Books such as *At the Heart of Alzheimer's*, *The 36-Hour Day*, and *Alzheimer's: A Caregiver's Guide and Sourcebook* explain the course of the disease and provide valuable practical advice.
- **The Internet.** Many sites provide concise information on the disease and most include practical tips for coping.

## How to communicate

As Alzheimer's slowly erodes a person's ability to communicate, trying to share meaning soon becomes very difficult. Not only may you struggle to understand what your loved one is trying to say, but he will have difficulty deciphering your words. This is incredibly frustrating for both of you. People with Alzheimer's have difficulty recalling and understanding words. They may use words incorrectly, arrange sentences illogically, make up new words for familiar objects, or repeat themselves over and over.

It's common for them to lose their train of thought, and need more time to understand even the simplest sentences. Sometimes they may even use offensive language, without actually meaning to. Here is how you can deal with it:

- **Call him by name,** making sure you have his attention before speaking.
- **Choose simple words and short sentences.**
- Use a **gentle, calm tone of voice.**

- **Minimise distractions and noise**, such as the television or radio, to help the person focus on what you are saying.
- **Show interest** by keeping eye contact and staying near. He needs to know you are listening and trying to understand.
- **Be patient.** Allow enough time for a response. Don't interrupt, criticise, correct or hurry the person.
- **Avoid talking to the person like a baby** or talking about him as if he's not there.

an automatic shut-off stove, smoke alarms and fire extinguishers. If he is a smoker, never allow him to smoke alone.

Caring for someone with Alzheimer's is heartbreaking. You grieve as you watch the person you love move further and further away from you. And while you have to deal with losing little bits of him every day, you are challenged with tough situations, strange behaviours and sometimes even aggression. Try to remember that it's the Alzheimer's and not the person. Most people with the disease are aware of the changes taking place and it's very frightening. Do your best to help them through this difficult time and don't forget to look after yourself, both physically and emotionally.

### Doing daily activities

Routine activities will become increasingly difficult, and even frightening, for someone with Alzheimer's. As the disease progresses, it will become your responsibility to get them done. In order to minimise the person's fear and frustration, keep these in mind:

- **Schedule routine activities.** Make the day predictable and less confusing by scheduling routine tasks for the same time each day. Try to arrange challenging activities for the time of day when he is most calm.
- **Let him help.** Don't assume he is completely helpless and immediately take away all responsibilities. While he can do things with little or no help, let him do so. Determine what tasks he is able to do, and if necessary, provide very clear steps or instructions for achieving the desired results.
- **Limit choices.** Try to ease the decision-making process for him by limiting choice and providing specific options. For example, give him two outfits to choose from and ask whether he'd like fish or chicken for dinner, instead of asking an open-ended question.
- **Reduce distractions.** It's easier for someone with Alzheimer's to complete a task when there are no distractions. Help them to focus on one thing at a time.
- **Be patient.** Realise that even the simplest task may take much longer than usual to complete, so don't rush your loved one.
- **Be flexible.** Remember that his ability to function and cope will steadily decline. You have to be willing to adapt schedules and routines according to changing behaviours and needs.
- **Relax your standards.** Don't expect things to be done at the same level as before the illness. It's okay if he doesn't want to bath every day or wants to wear the same clothes all the time.
- **Create a safe environment.** Make sure all harmful chemicals and medications are locked up. Remove rugs, electrical cords and anything else that could cause your loved one to trip and fall. Install secure locks on all windows and doors (particularly if he is prone to wandering) and remove locks from bathroom doors so he can't accidentally lock himself in. Consider installing

