

A Caregiver's Guide: Adapting Caregiving Strategies Throughout the Stages of Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's affects everyone a little differently, but understanding the progression of the disease will help for better planning. Keep in mind that when it comes to Alzheimer's, even the best laid plans can falter. Continuous education about Alzheimer's care and enlisting the support of professionals, family and friends is essential.

Care Focus for Beginning Stages: Family members can best assist a loved one with Alzheimer's through planning together, providing a patient, calm listening ear and memory prompts when needed.

What you might expect:

- Your loved one may experience some changes in thinking and learning abilities, which may not be detectable to others without daily contact.
- This stage of the disease can last for years.

What you can do:

- Be a care advocate for your loved one, providing emotional support and encouragement.
- Help your loved one to stay healthy and engaged in what he or she loves doing.
- Provide memory prompts and personal organization assistance when needed.
- Establish a regular daily routine.
- Provide assistance with money management or hire a professional to assist.
- Help plan for the future:
 - Discuss care setting desires (home, assisted living, hospice) and identify care providers.
 - Research support groups.
 - Discuss end of life care requests.

What you may need:

- A geriatric care manager to assist with planning care options.
- A smartphone app or other tool for sharing calendars that has audible reminders.
- Medication reminder system (could be an electronic device or a smartphone app).
- Time alone and with friends to keep your mind engaged in positive activities.

Care Focus for Middle Stages: Care strategies will be focused on flexibility, patience and daily structure with time for self-care for the caregiver.

What you might expect:

- Behavioral changes can occur, including sleep changes, physical and verbal outbursts (sometimes abusive), wandering and repetition of questions and activities.
- This stage can last for many years, and an increased amount of care will be needed as the dementia progresses.
- Daily tasks such as dressing, bathing and communicating may become more difficult.



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What you can do:

- Encourage as much independence as possible, but be ready to assist when needed.
- Enhance quality of life by doing simple activities together such as gardening or walking.
- Assist with communication efforts by speaking slowly and with simple, short sentences. Be patient in waiting for a response, as it may take some time to process your request.
- Daily routines and structure are important.

What you may need:

- Assistance from a specially trained Alzheimer's in-home caregiver to develop personalized caregiving and communication strategies.
- Someone to care for your loved one when you are away, as it will become dangerous for your loved one to be left alone.

Care Focus for Late Stages: Compassionate caregiving is focused on preserving the dignity and quality of life for your loved one while maintaining a safe, clean and healthy environment.

What you might expect:

- This stage of the disease may last for a few weeks to several years.
- Your loved one may have difficulty with eating, swallowing and walking.
- Oftentimes the ability to communicate with words and expression is lost.
- A vulnerability to infections, especially pneumonia is experienced.
- Incontinence is common.
- Close family members may become unidentifiable or seem like the enemy.

What you can do:

- Even though your loved one may be unable to talk, you can still connect with your loved one. Express your caring through touch, sound, sight, taste and smell.
- Assistance with eating may be necessary, adapting foods as needed for easier swallowing.
- Set a toileting schedule and provide assistance in the bathroom.
- If your loved one is bedridden or chair-bound, learn the ways to avoid pressure sores and "joint freezing" by relieving body pressure and increasing circulation.
- Take precautions to prevent infections.
- Watch for non-verbal signs that may indicate pain such as pale or flushed skin, swelling, wincing facial expressions or agitation.

What you may need:

- Around-the-clock care, with assistance from specially trained Alzheimer's caregivers.
- Training in how to perform the Heimlich maneuver in case of choking.
- Incontinence products.
- Hospice care, which focuses on dignity and quality of life.
- Training from a professional care provider on how to properly lift a person without causing injury, and/or a lifting device that can be installed in the home.

CareWorks Health Services caregivers are specially trained in providing skillful in-home caregiving for persons with Alzheimer's or dementia throughout the progression of the disease. Whether you are looking for respite, around-the-clock care or a hands-on way to learn techniques for providing the best care possible for your loved one, we are here for you and your family. Contact us today.

Source: Alzheimer's Association