



Caring for Persons with Dementia in a Pandemic

Introduction

Persons with dementia must be protected during a pandemic because of their age, their other illnesses and their actions and behaviors that make them more prone to getting infected. For example, they forget to wash their hands properly, they forget about social distancing and they tend to wander around despite the advice to stay at home. It is a challenging time as they are confined to their homes or if in a home care facility, they are unable to receive visitors.

What should the family members and caregivers do?

Make sure you are clean and healthy if you are caring for a person with dementia. If you went out to buy essentials, you must shower and change your clothes before you go near them. Avoid hugging, beso and mano at this time. It is also not advisable for children to go near persons with dementia. Children often have minor cough or colds and we have no idea if that is already covid19 as children usually have milder forms of the infection.

Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces such as door knobs, handles and switches. Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom and before eating. If you have to blow your nose, cough or sneeze, use a tissue paper. Immediate throw in the trash and wash hands thoroughly after. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.

Caregiver burnout is a reality. Relatives or caregivers who usually relieve the primary caregiver may not be around due to the quarantine. Other family members may need to step up and provide rest for the caregiver. There should be a protected time for sleep and rest. Relaxation and meditation exercises help a lot in managing stress and lengthening your patience.

What about the person with dementia?

It is important to continue all maintenance medications. The validity of old prescriptions are extended during the quarantine period. Exceptions are S2 license-requiring medications, but electronic prescriptions are accepted. Text or call your doctor's clinic how this can be arranged. There are often text numbers and emails on the doctor's prescription. Electronic prescriptions are sent via email, viber, fb messenger, whatsapp and the like. Regular check-ups are postponed until it is safe for everyone.

How is it best to adjust caregiving at home in the quarantine period?

- Communicate clearly and share only simple facts about the pandemic. Leave out the scary figures. Focus on steps that can be done to reduce infection. You may have to repeat this many times a day and if necessary, write notes on doors, sinks and the bathroom to remind them to wash their hands with soap and water. You may demonstrate hand washing and social distancing for better involvement.

- Try to have a schedule based on the usual waking and sleeping time of the person with dementia. Boredom is a reality especially since they are not able to go out of the house for their usual activities like going to church, going to malls and groceries and parks and walking around the neighborhood. This is a challenge to your creativity but here are some helpful tips:
 - Arrange for phone calls with elderly relatives and friends. This is the best time for them to catch up. You may also facilitate videocalls so they can see each other. After the call, you may give them something to look forward to by saying who you will call later.
 - Bring out the old photo albums. Now is the best time to browse through it and recall stories surrounding the events on the pictures.
 - Watch videos of weddings, baptisms, reunions and birthday parties.
 - You can engage them in conversation by asking what they can recall during their childhood. Examples are schooling, favorite snacks, favorite games, close friends, courtship, marriage and even favorite celebrities.
 - Join them in prayer if they want to pray. Gather their prayerbooks.
 - You may also try games but work around those that are familiar to the person with dementia previously. Examples are mahjong, card games, scrabble and the ever fun bingo. Videoke is also very useful and engaging. There are many games on the Ipad or tablet if they are familiar with its use.
 - You may also guide them to do exercises. There are safe exercises they can do even in the comfort of their chair. Some familiar upbeat music will help. No idea? Try Youtube: chair exercises for seniors.
 - You can also engage them in routine activities like folding clothes, cleaning and preparing vegetables for cooking and in watering the plants.
 - If they insist on going out, gently remind them that you all need to stay at home to avoid getting infected. Distract them if necessary.
 - Lastly, be creative. Maximize Youtube and other platforms. You can go on virtual tours of museums and places without leaving your home. You may also watch performances of their favorite singers and celebrities.

How do we manage challenging behaviors?

Persons with dementia often have behavioral and psychological issues that may worsen during this particularly stressful time. Examples are: agitation, restlessness, irritability, depression, anxiety, apathy, changes in appetite and sleep patterns. Some will resolve with proper reassurance, rest and sleep. For persistent troublesome behavior, it is always best to approach it systematically.

1. Describe the behavior. Write it down.
2. Investigate. Look for causes. What could have triggered it?
 - a. Environment
 - b. Lack of sleep
 - c. Medications and recent changes
 - d. Pain and limitation of movement
 - e. Fear, anxiety, boredom
3. Create a treatment plan. Again, be creative.
4. Evaluate if the plan worked. Revise and try a different approach if necessary.

Do not forget to share the treatment plan with the whole family. So they will know what works and what does not.

For example, the person with dementia has difficulty sleeping. Try to investigate if sleep was adequate the night before. Was the room too bright? Too noisy? Too warm? Repeated trips to the toilet for urination? Too many naps during the day? If it seems that the person with dementia has had too many naps, try to

limit these to less than an hour. Try to plan other activities that will stimulate and prevent daytime sleepiness. The more engaged they are in activities throughout the day, the better their nighttime sleep will be.

When do we need to go to the Emergency room?

A person with dementia may need an Emergency room visit for any of the following: fever, dry cough, watery diarrhea, difficulty of breathing or inability to wake up. In a pandemic, expect long waiting times in the emergency room. A simple call can be very helpful to guide you where to proceed, what to bring and generally be prepared. Write down the number of the nearest hospital and 2 other alternatives, in case that hospital is full. Plan logistics ahead: how to get there (own vehicle or ambulance service), who will go with the person with dementia, prepare the list of medications for handy reference and bring advanced directives if available. This will facilitate consultation and shorten the time spent in the emergency room.

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