

alzheimer's association®

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Personality Changes in Dementia

by Sonya Laputz Care Specialist

People living with dementia keep their essence and spirit, although many will experience major personality changes. A sweet, gentle person may behave sweeter after the on-set of Alzheimer's, while the "bossy" kind may become even more controlling. Those affected with fronto-temporal dementias may show more drastic and sudden personality changes. Lewy Body, which is another dementia causing disease, may cause hallucinations affecting behaviors.

In the early stages of Alzheimer's disease patients may experience behavior and personality changes such as increased irritability, anxiety and depression. Often times these changes are the motive why families decide to seek out medical help.

Alzheimer's patients can experience fluctuating personality changes, becoming extremely confused, suspicious, fearful or dependent on a family member. We all become sad or moody from time to time. The difference with Alzheimer's is that your loved one can show rapid mood swings from calm to tears to anger, for no apparent reason.

As your loved one enters the middle stages of Alzheimer's you may notice more behavioral symptoms. These include aggression, agitation and paranoia. There may be a fear that family members are stealing or hiding things from them, and often times their purse or wallet is the frequently "stolen" item. With the loss of control and inhibitions patients may also do



things that are completely uncharacteristic of the person you have come to know in your years together as a family or friend. Examples of this could be impulsiveness, swearing, sexual advances and general social inappropriateness.

Common personality changes include:

- ◆ Apathy
- ◆ Loss of interest in activities they previously enjoyed
- ◆ Insensitivity to others
- ◆ Paranoia
- ◆ Delusional thinking
- ◆ Social withdrawal
- ◆ Inability to make decisions
- ◆ Lack of initiative

For many relatives and caregivers, changes in behavior and personality are the most challenging and distressing part of Alzheimer's disease.

Keep in mind that these changes come as a result from the progressive deterioration of

Continues on next page

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Caregiver Tips

Four Handy Helpers

🔦 1 - Do not argue

If she thinks her husband is still alive, that is her reality.

Arguing with her will encourage frustration, confusion, fear, anger and a difficult time for both of you.

This is not about being correct, this is about helping a person with a serious disability.

🔦 2 - Use finesse, and do not be afraid to fudge the truth

Finesse: To be delicate, subtle, skillful and strategic when handling a difficult situation. Card players use finesse to bluff their opponents in a game.

When he is upset, apologize to diffuse the situation, even though you are not at fault.

🔦 3 - Make up a story to help them relax

If he wants to drive the car, you can say: *It is broken. Wait till the store brings the part this afternoon.*

Or if he wants to fix the TV, say: *I've already called a repairman. He'll be here on Saturday.*

If she is asking for her daddy, say: *Oh, Dad went on a business trip this week.*

🔦 4 - Re-direct

Change the subject or activity: *OK, but first we need to eat some lunch.*

Let's wait and call your sister after we've had a nap, Mom. She is probably taking a nap now, too.

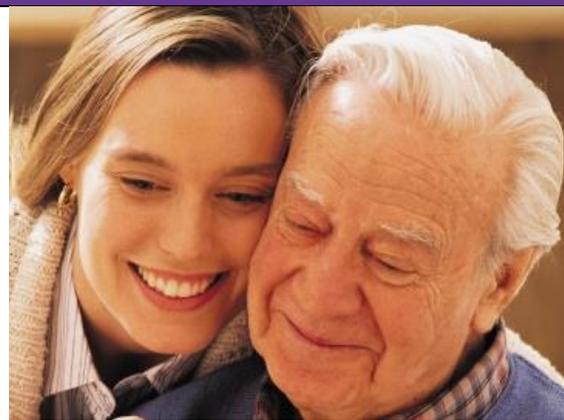
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the patient's brain. The disease continuously damages cells in multiple areas of the brain, affecting different cognitive abilities. When a part of the brain fails to do its job, after being damaged by the disease, a person may exhibit an "odd behavior."

The brain is a vast complex organ and the source of our thoughts, feelings, emotions and personality. With dementia the person may feel lost, worried, anxious, vulnerable and helpless, affecting how they react to situations. As dementia progresses the person's ability to navigate through day-to-day situations decreases. The person becomes more susceptible to outside influences, such as crowds, noises and environment, which became major factors in what behaviors will be shown.

Reminding yourself that "this is the disease and not my loved one" and understanding that these behaviors are caused by the disease may help you cope with possible personality changes.

As a caregiver you must develop your own set of coping skills and ways to deal with these changes in your loved one. Arguing with them or reminding them of what they are forgetting is not going to improve the situation. Often times this will only set them off or anger them more. Accepting that this is the disease and not your loved one's fault is a very crucial



step to dealing with the personality changes.

On a positive note try to enjoy the moments when your loved one is filled with humor and in the present moment. Laugh with them when a funny spontaneous moment presents itself. Join them in watching an old television program that they find funny. These simple moments will help them feel safe and secure. At the end of the day, moment to moment contentment is the goal.

Caregivers will experience stress and anxiety when confronted with challenging personality changes. It is important to remember to give yourself a stress-relieving break. Make sure you find time for the activities you enjoy. Ask a friend to sit with your loved one for an hour, while you take a break. They will be glad you asked for help. Take a walk, meditate, pray, eat, exercise, read or attend a support group. This is a journey of changes, but it is also a time to care for yourself.

Tools:

◆ **What Now? A Caregivers Guide and Resource Manual**

Created by our own staff at the Alzheimer's Association California Central Chapter, this book includes comprehensive information on dementia care, including strategies to deal with behavioral changes. Available for free download at alz.org/cacentral/documents/wn_web.pdf or for purchase (\$15) at your local office.

◆ **Support Groups** can be a great source of practical information on what to expect in terms of behavioral and personality changes, and skills on how to deal with them. Check out the listing of support groups in your area on page 5.

◆ **Care Specialists** are available 24/7 to help guide you through any changes you notice in your loved one with dementia: **800.272.3900** - *Keep that number handy!*