

alzheimer's association®

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The Power of Ice Cream

By Luciana Cramer, Educator and Care Specialist

We all have good days and bad days. We all have lived through moments of increased stress and frustration, when our patience and wisdom seem tested to the limit. And we all have developed our own coping skills on how to deal with these occasions, relieve the stress and dissipate the frustration.

Some of us distance ourselves from the situation and take time off; some step up and take more control over the situation; some use prayer or meditation; others use physical exercise and social activities to minimize the stress. Most people will use a combination of techniques depending on the kind and duration of the stressors they are facing. We have the ability to select our own coping strategies. We have that power.

This changes when we develop dementia.

When a brain is affected by dementia it has diminished capabilities to process information. A person with dementia is likely to be overwhelmed by everyday activities, things that prior to the onset of dementia may have even been pleasurable. A luncheon with friends and family, replacing the gas tank on the barbeque, baking a German-chocolate cake, packing for a weekend outing, using a list to shop for groceries at the supermarket: all kinds of activities, even ones considered routine before dementia, may be stressful and frustrating now.

In addition to the increased sense of frustration generated by daily activities, there is also a decrease in resilience for long hours spent awake. A brain affected by dementia gets tired earlier and processing information becomes even more challenging at the end of the day. Many people show signs of sundowning as a result.

Dementia therefore causes an increase in frustration with all kinds of events. It would be great if those afflicted could notice their feelings of frustration building up and then engage in self-soothing behaviors, as most of us would,



such as taking a break, meditating or taking control rather than allowing frustration to build up. They simply do not have the awareness of such feelings or the coping skills to deal with them. Dementia has taken those coping skills away.

You will never hear a person with dementia say “I’m getting a little frustrated so I’m going for a little walk on the beach to clear my mind.” This does not happen. Instead, when frustrated, a person with dementia may get angry, agitated, or cry, or pace around the home and rummage through drawers and cabinets. You, the caregiver, may not even know what the source of the frustration was, but you will notice the effects of the stressor on the person’s behavior. People with dementia cannot control their reactions to feelings of frustration, so they will manifest in some form, most likely through a behavior that they do not have the cognitive skills to choose.

This is the point when caregivers need to extend their own coping mechanisms to their loved ones with dementia and help them in dissipating their frustration. Those afflicted lack the initiative and insight to do it on their own. They are depending on their caregivers for stress reduction and relief. Your help is needed to mitigate the frustration and guide the person with dementia into a soothing, more joyful and relaxed state.



To prevent or reduce agitation:

- ◆ **Create a calm environment.**
Remove stressors. This may involve moving the person to a safer or quieter place, or offering a security object, rest or privacy. Try soothing rituals and limiting caffeine use.
- ◆ **Avoid environmental triggers.**
Noise, glare and background distraction (such as having the television on) can act as triggers.
- ◆ **Monitor personal comfort.**
Check for pain, hunger, thirst, constipation, full bladder, fatigue, infections and skin irritation. Make sure the room is at a comfortable temperature. Be sensitive to fears, misperceived threats and frustration with expressing what is wanted.
- ◆ **Simplify tasks and routines.**
- ◆ **Provide an opportunity for exercise.**
Go for a walk. Garden together. Put on music and dance.

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In moments like this, it is good to remain calm and follow some basic steps.

First, try to identify and neutralize the possible source of stress. Find out what the problem is and take control. Make the environment feel like a safe place. Turn off the TV, send the kids to the other room, adjust the lighting and room temperature, stop asking the person with dementia to do something they do not want to do. Sometimes a simple adjustment can generate great relief for those with dementia. They, themselves, cannot make those adjustments even though they may yearn for them.

Don't be surprised if there is nothing occurring that could possibly be causing the frustration. Dementia itself can be the cause. The frustration may also be caused by a delusional scenario created by the afflicted person's mind, far from reality. Do not try to bring your loved one to your reality. Act as if their delusions or hallucinations were true, and react accordingly. If they see *bugs in the room*, you *kill the bugs*. And don't expect them to always tell you what the problem is: many times they don't realize what it is. It is up to you to figure it out.

Next, you must provide reassurance; let them know it is ok. Sincerely say soothing words such as *everything is all right, I'm here with you, I will help you, I love you*. Smile and touch them warmly. Reassurance from a loved one is a very powerful balm for dementia patients. They need it as a respite from the dementia world, where loneliness, uncertainty and confusion rule. Your love and reassurance will make everything better. Even though the person with dementia may not be able to process logically what is going on, they are able to appreciate soothing words, behaviors and feelings.

And then, ice cream!

Yes, ice cream. It takes all of your worries away. It is soothing and delicious, and personable: everyone has a favorite flavor! Ice cream brings people with dementia to happier, warmer times when the treat was shared with friends and loved ones at special, joyous occasions. Ice cream has the power to immediately elicit soothing feelings at the very first taste of a single spoon-full. It erases all the negative feelings related to the frustration and continues to stimulate pleasure receptors in the brain with every new scoop. And dementia (here is the best part!) allows one to fully enjoy the treat, with no concerns for calories, weight gain or dietary needs, completely guilt free! For people with dementia, ice cream is far more effective and safe than Prozac, or any other "happy" drug on the market!

If you are caring for a loved one with dementia, find out what flavor is their absolute favorite and **NEVER RUN OUT OF ICE CREAM!** If you have dietary concerns, use brands that observe your dietary needs. There are plenty of diabetic friendly brands available. Ice cream can also be found in low fat, low cal, sugar free and lactose free varieties. Whatever kind or flavor you use, always have plenty of it handy always. Ice cream is an essential part of your dementia care tool-kit, like a Swiss army knife that's invaluable for many occasions.

The holidays are here. With family and friends gathering for the celebrations, there may be an increased risk for dementia patients to become overwhelmed. Remember to stay calm, control the environment, provide reassurance and, don't forget, plenty of ice cream.



Tools:

We Can Help

**Do you have questions or concerns about your loved one's changing behavior?
The Alzheimer's Association is here to help.**

Call our 24/7 Helpline: 800.272.3900

Locate a support group in your community

Visit our message boards