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Important Elements of Thought: Part I of IV

Memory and language

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Family caregivers occupy a critical place in the health care system for people with progressive dementia, and obtaining education on what to expect and how to observe your loved one's changes to impart and encourage techniques to compensate for the cognitive losses a person with dementia experiences supports this role. Beginning a four-part series, this issue of *Tips & Tools* looks closely at *memory and language*, two areas of cognition that are affected by dementia.

Typically, the way we interact with friends and family is based on traditional cognitive functioning—we commonly assume that our companion's thinking functions are equal to our own. With dementia, however, there is a need to develop new ways of interacting based on a deeper understanding of the person's cognitive capabilities: the ability to reflect, remember, and reason. Can the person consider "what if"? and can he initiate plans and follow sequences?

A person with dementia loses various thought processes—memory, reason, judgment, language, organization, perception, abstraction, and attention. Although the progression of dementia has a general pattern, the losses take place in different ways and at different rates for each individual. Because these losses dramatically affect the person, the caregiver must find new strategies for communicating with and caring for a loved one.

Memory is the glue that attaches a person to life's continuity. It connects us to those in our lives and how we fit in. When memory



begins to fail, our ties to life begin to unravel.

One of the first signs of progressive dementia is when memory begins to fade. Typically, memory problems will occur with the recall of recent events; a person may have difficulty recalling what occurred in the not-so-distant past. Although memory loss occurs, immediate recall can remain intact, such that the person can understand what you say at the moment, however, a short time later, he may not recall the interaction at all.

As memory begins to decline:

... the world may not make sense—Events become disconnected to the person with dementia. Rather than seeing that getting dressed and getting into the car will lead to dinner with friends may be lost, each will be perceived as an isolated activity.

... learning will not occur—Because short-term memory is important for learning, people with memory problems are less able to learn new skills, facts, or ideas. While new activities may be important for people with dementia, do not expect them to be able to do the same thing tomorrow. They won't remember and they function most comfortably with a steady routine.



Tips

Savvy Care Strategies

- Supply information that is forgotten without drawing attention to the memory loss.
- Familiarity can substitute for memory, so create or strengthen routines.
- Long term memories provide the basis for reminiscence and share activities. Look at old photos.
- Don't point out memory loss, it can make the person feel like a failure or embarrassed.
- Fill in missing words when you can.
- If it appears funny to your loved one, laugh along.
- Assess what is actually getting through.
- Don't worry about correcting the person or trying to get him to become more effective.
- Lower the expectation for communication to be collaborative and equal.
- Try using shorter sentences or emphasize just one or two key words.

- **... awkward feelings arise**—A person may feel embarrassed by not being able to remember. Self-esteem can suffer and some may feel a sense of failure or grief.

- **... social skills decline**—Social graces may fall away as manners and social behavior are forgotten. Your loved one may become uninhibited.



What you can do:

Keep in mind that what is happening to your loved one's cognition is normal in dementia. As a caregiver you must learn to provide comfort and security. There is no way to nudge memory back into action. Adjust your expectations; simplify and create an environment in which the person can succeed. Don't expect her to acquire new information or behavior. Expect the unexpected.

Language, both expressed and received, is communication that connects us to one another. We rely on it to express our needs and feelings. Your loved one may retain verbal skills throughout the stages of dementia by using stock phrases that may be perceived as fairly ordinary social conversation. This, however, may mislead the caregiver, thinking the person has greater cognitive skills than he has. Be cautious.

Like memory, the loss of language cannot be reversed. An early problem is usually with word finding; be prepared to prompt your loved one with a missing word. Modify your sentences, simplifying both content and expression. Avoid communicating complex sequences of events by using KISS (Keep It Simple Sweetie). Tangible forms of communication, such as pointing, writing, and touching may augment comprehension.

As language begins to decline:

- **... your loved one may feel these losses**—In the early stages the patient may express frustration about word loss or lack

of comprehension. Encourage him to describe the object if he can't come up with the right word.

- **... their words may fool you**—

Even in the later stages, a person with dementia may still use remembered phrases, masking how much dementia has affected her language skills. As a caregiver, it is important to know how great the distance may be between appearance and reality.

...communicating to your loved one is tricky—It takes some adjustment in how we communicate or verify our success in getting through to a person with dementia. Unaccustomed to the world of dementia, we tend to take for granted that our communication is understood.

What you can do:

Keep in mind that the communication connection between you and your loved one is breaking down and is becoming more difficult and less reliable. Plan on taking the lead when communicating with your loved one. Be patient, offer help with word finding, and listen carefully to decipher the intended meaning of what you hear. Try to adjust your communication strategy to your loved one's strengths and abilities.

Caring for a loved one with dementia creates a tremendous amount of stress. Not only does one deal with the day-to-day reality of the situation, but also one's own feelings of sadness and loss. As the caregiver, you will oversee all aspects of the health system for your loved one with dementia, and you will want to keep him active and functioning in the community for as long as possible.

The information in this issue is based on The Savvy Caregiver program. The Savvy Caregiver is a 4-week program for family caregivers. It presents an opportunity to go beyond introductory education offerings and address concerns caring for your loved one.

Our next Savvy Caregiver Workshop Series will be Thursdays, 9:00 -12:00 October 5, 12, 19 and 26 in Santa Barbara.