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Important Elements of Thought: Part II of IV Reason & Judgment

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Family members who become caregivers assume a role—caregiving—for which they are generally not prepared or trained. Gaining an education on what to expect, how to observe a loved one’s changes, and how to impart and encourage techniques to compensate for the cognitive losses a person with dementia experiences, supports this role. Part II of a four-part series, this issue of *Tips & Tools* examines *judgment and reason*, two areas of cognition that are affected by dementia.

A person with dementia loses various thought processes—memory, reason, judgment, language, abstraction, and attention, as well as organizational and perceptual abilities. 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 have such a dramatic impact, the caregiver must find new strategies for communicating with and caring for a loved one.

Consider the last time you attempted to persuade a person to do something you wanted him to do? For the most part, strategies used in this type of conversation were probably in the realm of reasoning and bargaining. People with cognitive impairment, however, are likely to misunderstand the motives and the outcomes of the requested act.

Reason—the ability to think and understand things in a logical way—is fundamental to adult interactions. We tend to rely on the power of reason to guide the basic way we behave with one another. Thus, the absence of the ability to reason may be equally



problematic for both the person with dementia and his caregiver.

Impaired reasoning is typically connected to behavioral concerns, since a person with dementia may not be able to think through a situation to identify a proper response. He may challenge your attempt to guide him to a desired result and no attempts to “reason” with him will change his mind.

As reason begins to decline:

... People with dementia appear manipulative—While we assume others to be reasonable when we interact with them, dementia turns this upside down. Lengthy explanations and logic won’t work and may backfire. As caregiver, it is time to take more control.

... Prioritizing, sequencing, and planning become difficult—Because reason helps us understand what is important and necessary to maintain order in our lives, explaining this to a person with dementia will not work and may create a conflict between you and your loved one.

... Decision making will become impaired—What would you like to do? What would you like to wear? What would you like to eat? Our lives have been full of these types of exchanges that nourish relationships and show respect. However,

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Savvy Care Strategies

- Do not argue reason or explain.
- Ask for help from your loved one (“it would help me if you’d put this shirt on”).
- Present fewer choices, such as “would you like to wear the blue shirt or the white one?”
- Be prepared to take control; reasoning won’t work.
- Assume responsibility for safety and be prepared to watch out for the person at all times.
- Don’t take it personally.
- As dementia progresses caregivers have to become more directive and provide less explanation.
- Let your loved one make mistakes in judgment as long as they are not threats to safety; for example, dressing with bad choices of colors, so what?

these questions also require the power of reason; a person with dementia may feel even more confused by the choices, and the caregiver expecting the answers may become frustrated.

What you can do:

Keep in mind that traditional interactions with your loved one may no longer work because the thinking ability that once supported the relationship is failing. Simplify your language and offer fewer choices, such as “would you like to wear the blue shirt or the white one?” Don’t expect the person to do something just because you tell her to, rather ask her for help with something.

Judgment is the ability to make sensible assessments or conclusions, such as the safety or benefit of a situation. It allows us to imagine the possible outcomes of a situation and consider the negative consequences of making a bad decision. This ability keeps us from wandering across a busy street or falling into a dangerous situation. Judgment permeates all aspects of living, such as choosing where to live, what decisions to make about life-sustaining treatment, or how to invest money or dispose of property.

This capacity is lost relatively early in dementia. Because of distorted thinking, judgment may be poor, declining from your loved one’s previous decision-making abilities. This makes it difficult to know how to involve your loved one in critical choices.

As judgment begins to decline:

... **Safety becomes a major issue**—A person cannot watch out for his own safety. Driving, the use of kitchen appliances, financial matters, and access to the outside world must be assessed.

... **Caregivers must take more control**—A person with dementia may perhaps become more hesitant, use more caution, and begin to rely more on others or instead

may become impulsive, acting without considering the consequences. In addition, your loved one may be vulnerable to financial abuse, such as get-rich-quick schemes received in the mail or seen on TV.



... **Self centeredness and insensitive behavior may begin to appear**—Because social behavior and respect for others is a learned behavior, it

can be forgotten as dementia progresses. Insensitivity toward others is somewhat common in people with dementia since they gradually lose the ability to understand how their behavior affects others. Due to the loss of judgment, inhibitions are lost and your loved one may blurt out something that could be hurtful or offensive.

What you can do:

Be clear with instructions and be prepared to take control. Don’t take it personally if your loved one appears to disregard manners or concerns for other’s feelings. Readjust your expectations. Since judgment and reasoning will no longer work, you must determine when it is time for him to stop driving, or when it is no longer safe for her to pay the bills or use the kitchen stove. Do whatever it takes to prevent unsafe behaviors and, if necessary, enlist your doctor to help.

Getting a person with dementia to discontinue a potentially unsafe behavior, such as driving, handling the family finances, or wandering and getting lost is not easy. It helps if there is clear evidence of impaired capacity, evidence that might be obtained from a physician or a professional driving assessor. Some families hide or disable the car; others request that the DMV be notified of a diagnosis of dementia so the driver’s license will be revoked.

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.