

Important Elements of Thought: Part III of IV

Perception and Abstraction

*Marcy Maler, MMFT, Art Therapy
Educator & Care Specialist*

Caregiving is a generous and loving act. It often is a role inadvertently acquired by a family member—a role which one is not generally prepared or trained to do. Burden and burnout are real problems, emphasizing the need for a caregiver to attend to his own needs. Education provides strategies that can be used to support this role.

Part III of this four-part series, this issue of *Tips & Tools* examines **perception** and **abstraction**, two areas of cognition that are affected by dementia.

A person with dementia loses memory, reason, judgment, language, organization, perception, abstraction, and attention. Although the progression of dementia has a general pattern, these 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.

Perception engages our senses, allowing us to take in the world around us. We do this not only by sight and sound, but also through touch, smell, and taste. **Abstract thought** relies on concepts and things that are *not* concrete, such as time. Both perception and abstract thinking abilities are lost fairly early in progressive dementia. For a person living with dementia, many of the concepts they had once utilized no longer hold the same meaning.

Perception plays an important role in social function. We rely on perception to identify and recognize pleasure including people we know, sights we enjoy, and foods we like to eat.



Perception requires both receiving and interpreting information from the outside world. It warns us of things that are harmful or unpleasant helps us seek pleasure or safety. Perception is key in the ability to prepare for things as they occur, easing the element of surprise.

As perception begins to decline:

... Mistakes are made—As the disease progresses, your loved one may interpret images on TV as being real. Reflections, including their own, may be mistaken for a stranger or for someone who suddenly appears and disappears. As caregiver, your job is to reassure.

... Suspicion and paranoia can occur—You may be accused of things like cheating, infidelity, or theft. A decline in perception may cause your loved one to believe someone is about to harm them. By taking his clothes to a laundry, he may think they have been stolen. Don't take it personal.

... Overload and confusion may increase—Your loved one may become less able to take in and make sense of the world. Shopping malls and other crowded and noisy places may be overwhelming for her. Try and understand that approaching her from behind may confuse or upset her even further.

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California Central Coast
Chapter

Santa Barbara County
1528 Chapala St., #204
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
Tel: 805.892.4259

120 E. Jones St, #113
Santa Maria, CA 93454
Tel: 805.636.6432

San Luis Obispo County
71 Zaca Ln Suite 110
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
Tel: 805.547.3830

Ventura County
2580 E. Main St Suite 201
Ventura, CA 93003
Tel: 805.494.5200

24-Hour Helpline:
800.272.3900

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Tips

Savvy Care Strategies

- Do not argue reason or explain.
- Provide simple concrete direction.
- Live in the moment.
- Consider that the fictional shows on TV may be misinterpreted for a real situation.
- Do not give advance mention to impending events, but rather wait until it is actually time to get ready.
- Keep to uncrowded and quiet outings.
- Allay your loved one's fears and suspicions by acknowledging and validating the perception; provide reassurance.
- Distractions become more and more of a problem for your loved one—a reason not to drive.
- Avoid using power tools and sharp utensils.
- Reassurance is important.

and noisy places may be overwhelming for her.

What you can do:

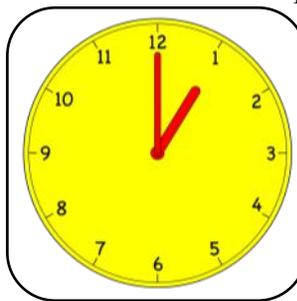
Keep in mind that your loved one is losing his ability to make sense of what he sees or hears. This may produce fear, defensiveness, or combative behaviors. You may no longer share an experience in the same manner because you no longer share the same perception of the world; you do not operate from the same interpretive premise. Reassurance will be more effective than an attempt at reasoning. Be mindful of his perspective of the environment, remove objects that may appear confusing. Monitor signs of discomfort, particularly during outings; a nice quiet walk in the park may be a better fit than a crowded mall.

Abstraction is the ability to consider the world in non-concrete terms—comprehension of ideas, numbers, time, directions, and hypothetical situations. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow represent time as a continuum, and is the main function of abstract thought.

For someone with dementia, abstract thinking becomes less reliable; the person will live more and more in the moment. Thinking about things that happened in the past or that will happen in the future become harder and harder to comprehend. Your loved one may become confused if he is required to reconstruct a past event or project toward a future event or outcome.

As abstraction begins to decline:

... **A person lives more and more in the moment**—A person may become rooted in the here and now and confused by ideas of past and future. Notions like tomorrow, next week, or this evening begin to lose meaning and, without a sense for time, it will be difficult for her to recognize sequences or prioritize activities.



... **Connections are lost**—A person with dementia may hear words and say words, but the depth of their meaning may seem to fade. This might be seen in the inability to follow instructions, or her calling an adult child “son” one day and “dad” the next. A general connection is still there, but your loved one may not know or understand what the exact connection is.

... Getting and feeling lost is easy—

Feeling unsure and confused about one's whereabouts is common. The map in the mind of a person with dementia may no longer be able to visualize a shortcut or a direct route from one place to another; further, she may no longer understand the layout of the neighborhood, city, state or world. Your loved one may not remember familiar landmarks and will have a hard time navigating even a familiar route.

What you can do:

Adjust your expectations. Don't assume that your loved one can understand or relate to what is happening beyond the here and now. Learn and accept his limitations, then help create an environment or a system in which he will still succeed. Use visual cues: Post a picture of a toilet on the bathroom door, or of socks on his sock drawer. It is helpful to notify family and friends about your loved one's confusion so they too can be supportive.

Readjust your strategies. Try to remember that statements like “be ready by noon” or “your daughter will take you out for lunch today” will not benefit or motivate your loved one. She may become confused by broad instructions or interpret them to mean “now,” asking you repeatedly “When are we leaving?” Your loved one is now living in a very concrete present and a very immediate space—the here-and-now.

The information in this issue is based on The Savvy Caregiver program. The Savvy Caregiver is a 4-week program for family caregivers.