

Important Elements of Thought: Part IV of IV

Attention and Organization

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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 IV of this *Tips & Tools* series examines **attention** and **organization**, 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 follows a general pattern, these losses take place in different ways and at different rates for each individual. A person with dementia will quickly shift from one thing to another. Losing the ability to stay focused can make commonplace things seem more difficult. Because these losses dramatically affect the person afflicted with dementia, the caregiver must find new strategies for communicating with and caring for a loved one.

Attention allows us to remain focused and to deal with the many distractions that occur in the environment. It functions as a filter when we attempt to make a choice among competing stimuli. Additionally, attention gives us the ability to concentrate on a task to reach its conclusion. A person living with dementia experiences a weakened attention span. As dementia progresses, a person's ability to stick with a task or return to it after a distraction is diminished.



Attention deficits are particularly problematic for driving. Since dementia affects the ability to concentrate early in the disease, driving should be restricted when symptoms are apparent and withdrawn as soon as possible.

As attention begins to decline:

... It becomes harder to stay on task— You may need to help your loved one stay focused on a task. There is a relationship between attention and ability. Tasks that fit a person's ability are more likely to capture and hold his attention than those that are too complex or too simple. Try to provide tasks in which your loved one can be successful.

... Adjust your expectations— The quality of the outcome is not as important as performing an activity. Caregiver frustration can easily come from having unrealistic expectations, just as patient frustration can result from tasks that are too challenging. The objective should be to keep your loved one involved in an activity. Giving your loved one a sense of purpose is a big part of caregiving success!

... Be mindful of the increased need for structuring, refocusing and prompting to stay on task— Not only will your loved one benefit from tasks that are appropriate to his abilities, but the environment you create for the task should be free of distractions. If an activity is too hard or too easy, he may lose

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Tips

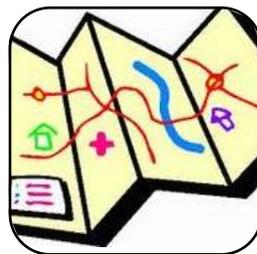
Savvy Care Attention and Organization Strategies

- Provide simple concrete direction.
- Fit the task to the person's abilities.
- Keep reminding the person of the purpose of the activity.
- Pay attention to environment and remove distractions.
- Recognize the increasing need for monitoring and refocusing.
- Set up activities with the appropriate number of steps.
- Distractions become more and more of a problem for your loved one—a reason not to drive.
- Provide appropriate direction, support, and prompting when involved in an activity.
- Reassurance is important.
- Adjust your expectations and relax your standards.

interest. If there is too much going on around him, he may easily be diverted.

What you can do:

The way you design and support a task is important. As caregiver, try to structure the kind of activities your loved one can successfully perform. Help her begin the task, and provide reminders and cues at each step to keep her moving forward. Repeat the types of activities that hold your loved one's attention, she enjoys, and she can complete well.



Organization identifies your purpose or goal, and establishes the sequence of activities that lead to task accomplishment. Organization is generally built into the structure of our daily lives. Going to the store, for example, takes organization and planning, whether or not you formally make a list. You know the first step is getting up, followed by getting dressed, having a bite to eat, identifying what you must purchase, collecting your grocery bags, and then driving to the store. Dementia erodes a person's ability to identify and follow the sequential steps and it impairs one's ability to understand and accomplish the steps successfully.

For a person with dementia it is increasingly difficult to establish and remember endpoints or the means by which to achieve them. However, a familiar routine and over-learned skills (muscle memory) may compensate for the losses, such that they can perform a familiar task without thought or reflection. Routine may become a strong ally.

As organization begins to decline:

... Goals may be lost—Even early in the disease people may not remember the connections between purpose, goals and actions. Distractions tend to contribute to their forgetting the original goal. Once a goal is lost, completion of the task will be lost as well.

... When you ask your loved one to help with something, it may not get done—

You might ask your loved one to start the dishwasher. She may put the dishes in the machine, and turn it on, but neglect to put in the soap. Or, not differentiating clean from dirty, she may take the dirty dishes out and put them away, forgetting that the machine has to go through several cycles before the dishes are done. Mistakes like these are very likely to occur.

What you can do:

In addition to setting up a task, preparing and directing activities is key to providing structure and organization for your loved one. This can be done by gathering all the necessary materials for a task, arranging these in the proper sequence, and providing direction for their use.

Your loved one may no longer be able to complete an entire task from beginning to end on his own, but he may still be able to accomplish parts of the task. Let him do whatever he can still do, then complete the parts that he can't achieve, and lavish praise on him. By doing this, you will give him a sense of purpose and a sense of satisfaction.

Relax your standards. The organization of a household is usually very complex. You may feel things are increasingly disorganized as the disease progresses and you assume more and more of the household management. This is normal. It IS extra work to maintain the house and family finances, the doctors' appointments . . . and keep your loved one stimulated, well, and content. Pace yourself, solicit her participation in whatever capacity she can, and try not to become even more overwhelmed. Let go and try to accept a certain amount of imperfection in exchange for a relief from a few pressures.

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