Do We Have to Talk About This?

The innate desire to be touched and loved does not diminish with age. As a youth-oriented society, we tend to equate sex with youth and steer clear of the topic of senior sexuality. Sure, it can be an uncomfortable subject, but it is an issue that simply cannot be ignored.

If your spouse or partner has Alzheimer’s disease or another form of dementia, it’s likely you will experience significant changes in your intimate relationship. As the disease progresses, these changes become ever more present.

The person with the disease and the partner may be experiencing reduced interest in sex, which can be very hurtful and confusing. It is important to know why these changes are happening so you can maintain a close connection with your loved one. The loss of sexual inhibition is not a reflection of the person’s character, but symptoms of the disease itself. For example, the person with the disease may be suffering from depression. If a medical evaluation confirms your loved one is suffering from depression, treatment may help improve sexual interest. This is true for partners who may be suffering from depression, as well.

On the contrary, a person with Alzheimer’s disease may show an increased interest in sex and even exhibit inappropriate behaviors. Some inappropriate behaviors that could arise are masturbating or undressing in public, fondling or hugging strangers, using sexually explicit language or approaching a non-spouse or partner for sexual activity.

For example, it’s possible for a man with Alzheimer’s disease to make advances toward his daughter or other women that are quite younger than he. Oftentimes, this is because the disease has caused the man to believe he is much younger than he actually is. If his daughter is close to the age he thinks he is, it is logical within his reality for him to believe he is best suited to be with someone “his age.” It’s possible he may even be mistaking his daughter for his wife.

While not all people with dementia exhibit these behaviors, it is important to know that they may occur and can be quite upsetting.
There is no single best approach in adjusting to the changes that affect the intimate relationship between you and your partner, but there are effective ways to handle the inappropriate behaviors and meet your loved one’s need for affection and comfort.

Your partner may be eliciting inappropriate sexual behaviors for a variety of reasons, some including feelings of anxiety, fear, jealousy, suspiciousness and confusion. Scolding, arguing with or confronting the person will likely lead to an escalation of the problem. Knowing what triggers these feelings can be helpful in avoiding them before the behavior even occurs.

Redirecting your loved one to another task, changing the subject, providing physical affection such as a hug, ignoring the behavior, if possible, and reacting with patience are effective ways to handle inappropriate behaviors.

React to your loved one’s decreased or increased sexual desires with patience and gentleness, making sure to maintain plenty of physical contact such as hugging or holding hands. This can help reassure both you and your partner that your loving connection still can endure through this devastating disease. When verbal communication becomes more difficult for the person with dementia, touch has come a powerful way to communicate love, affection and caring.

These changes can be very difficult to deal with. Please take the time to care for yourself if you are experiencing issues with intimacy within your relationship. The Alzheimer’s Association has open support groups and an online community (ALZconnected.org) where you can express your feelings and learn new ways of coping with these symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease.

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