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## The Importance of Keeping It Simple

By Luciana Cramer, Care Specialist

Lorraine called her dad, Jerry, one evening and said, "I have the day off tomorrow and will stop by at noon to pick you up for lunch at your favorite restaurant." Jerry was excited with the news and mentioned that he was really looking forward to seeing her, and would be ready and waiting for her *with bells on*. On the following day at noon, Lorraine arrived and Jerry opened the door still wearing his pajamas, seemingly surprised to see her. "Dad," she asked, "is there something wrong? Why are you not ready to go out to lunch?" Jerry replied that he was happy to see her but he did not know she was coming and maybe, next time she should call ahead.

Patients with dementia conditions, including those with Alzheimer's disease, experience increasing difficulties in retaining current information. In the beginning stages of dementia, they have problems keeping their schedule, appointments and deadlines. In later stages, they may not be able to recall a conversation that happened just minutes ago.

The "inability to recall new verbal communications" is, according to Santa Barbara neurologist Robert Harbaugh, one of the hallmarks of early Alzheimer's disease. What is told is easily forgotten; what is written down can be read multiple times as needed, therefore more likely to be remembered.

Patients, even at the very beginning stages, rely heavily on reminder tools. They may become avid note takers and carry their calendars everywhere they go. Family members start noticing that all verbal



communications of any importance will need to be written down, or otherwise be forgotten. Had Jerry written down his first conversation with Lorraine, he would be more likely to remember it the next day.

Notes, however, can be misplaced, become disorganized and overwhelming. Calendars, as dementia progresses, become confusing and difficult to interpret. Increased problems with organization and abstraction skills may further hinder the use of such tools. Patients at middle stages require a simpler and more reliable form of keeping track of day-to-day information.

A simple but essential method for keeping track of daily information is the plain, white, dry-erase message board. As a care specialist for the Alzheimer's Association, I recommend it to every family affected with dementia.

It does not need to be big. A 2' by 3' board will be sufficient. It should be attached to a wall - nailed, screwed or glued - in a way that it cannot be moved around, keeping it from getting misplaced.

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There may be periods when he presents a behavior, story, or question REPEATEDLY. Your patience may wear very thin.

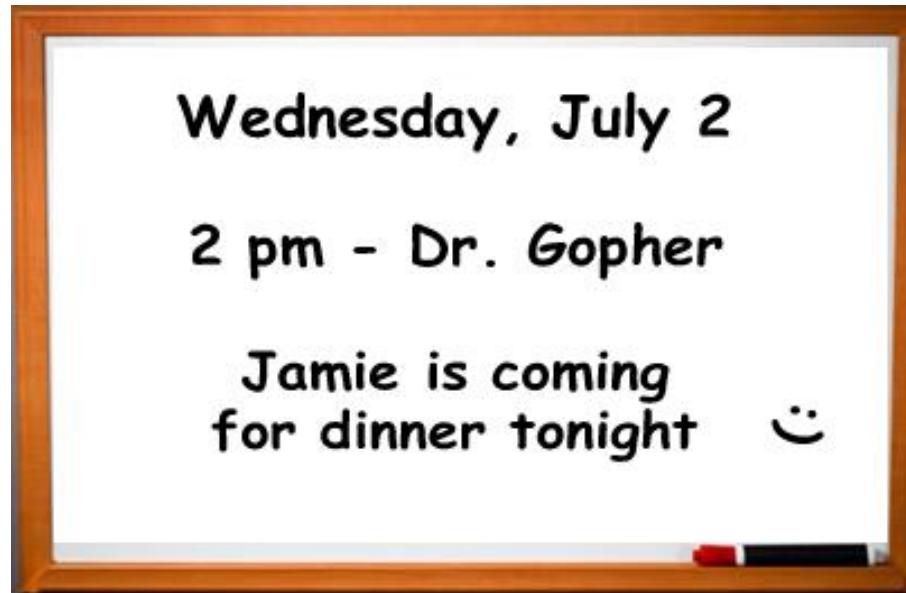
#### **Understand**

- ◆ It is the disease causing him to do this
- ◆ It is a malfunction in the brain
- ◆ The annoying behavior can be temporary or long term
- ◆ You may not be able to change her behavior
- ◆ You can change *your own* thoughts and feelings *about* her behavior

#### **Do**

- ◆ Take a break
- ◆ Experiment with different kinds of music to soothe the person and reduce the anxiety that may be driving the behavior
- ◆ Get your broad-view perspective refreshed
- ◆ Limited financial help for respite may be provided by the Alzheimer's Association so you can get a break
- ◆ Learn about your local adult day care facility
- ◆ Contact the Alzheimer's Association Helpline at 800.272.3900
- ◆ Attend a support group

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On it, caregivers should write the basic information that is relevant for that particular day such as the day of the week, the doctor's appointment or who is coming for dinner. Avoid placing information of future events, such as *cousin Paul visiting in two months* or *colonoscopy next week*. The information on the board must be succinct, direct and current.

The best time to install a message board is during the beginning stages of dementia, when patients will quickly learn to use it for writing and retrieving information. If the board is placed during middle stages, people with dementia may have a more difficult time getting used to its *novelty*, and need multiple reminders on where to look for it: "What time is the doctor's appointment? I don't know, take a look at the board."

In both instances, however, the board can greatly improve communication.

People living with dementia find great comfort in knowing that the information they want can be easily found on the board. It is reassuring to know where to go to find out *where my wife is* or *when will she be back*. In a dementia world dominated by confusion, the board

becomes a soothing source of stability and helps avoid and reduce anxiety.

Caregivers also greatly benefit from using the board. It is the best way of conveying everyday information

and managing perhaps one of the most bothersome symptoms of dementia for caregivers: repetitive questioning. *What day is today?* *What Day is today?* *What day is today?* Now caregivers can direct their loved ones to the board instead of endlessly giving answers to the same endless questions.

The importance of the board as a communication and memory tool increases as dementia progresses. Caregivers may not see much of its value in the beginning stages, when their loved ones are still relatively functional and able to conduct most of their regular activities without prompting. But dementia is progressive, increasingly affecting one's ability to recall conversations, organize schedules and plan in advance. When reaching the middle stages, most memory tools become cumbersome or futile, while the simplicity of the white board will remain effective. The more severe the dementia, the more basic the information on the board should be. But it will still be the best way of providing reminders, reassurance and reducing anxiety related to the confusion caused by dementia.