

Monthly newsletter for people caring for those affected with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia.



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

Ventura County

2580 E Main Street
Suite 201
Ventura, CA 93003
805.494.5200

24-Hour Helpline:
800.272.3900

alz.org/CaCentral

Knowing when to step-in

By Leila Thayer Malone

Many changes occur when you have a loved one living with dementia. One of the most challenging of these is the change in the dynamics of your relationship.

Whether you are a spouse, adult child, sibling, or friend, it can be difficult to grapple with these changes. For adult children, it can be especially difficult for a parent to rely on you for care; for a spouse, what had been a 50/50 partnership will begin to feel much more one-sided; and for siblings or friends, it can be challenging to know where the line is between support and reliance.

Regardless of your relationship to the person with dementia, as a caregiver you will have to make difficult decisions that the person may disagree with. It is important to recognize when to step-in and when to empower yourself to ensure the person's safety and wellbeing. Balancing the person's need for autonomy and his need for safety is an essential skill the caregiver must learn.

Let us review the changes that occur in the person's ability to think as dementia progresses. Dementia causes memory loss that can become dangerous. For instance, he may forget that he has left the stove on, posing a serious fire danger. Her behavior may change and she may become more suspicious, fearful, and easily confused. He is much more susceptible to financial scammers, and can be taken advantage of. Her physical abilities may be affected, and she can begin to lose her balance more frequently. His sense of time and space may be altered, increasing the possibility of his forgetting his way home from a familiar place.

All of these changes put your loved one at risk for both physical and financial harm. As a caregiver, you may have to grapple



with the idea that he is no longer able to make decisions for himself. Unfortunately, this is often even more difficult for your loved one to accept. Maintaining her autonomy is important, and it is essential for the caregiver to respect that and help the patient preserve it for as long as possible. Still, the time will come when the caregiver must step-up and make decisions for his loved one.

Regardless of the relationship, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the person with dementia is a key role of any caregiver. Many caregivers will face fierce opposition when it comes to sensitive topics, such as continuing to drive or living independently. This is common; the person with dementia will recognize that her autonomy and independence are slipping away. These types of decisions are difficult and uncomfortable for both of you, but will be common throughout your journey as caregiver.

The first (and most important) tip is to *never argue* with a person with dementia. Consider, dementia affects a person's ability to reason. Logical arguments about his safety and your concern for him may not be heard or understood. Yet not making and implementing the decision does not resolve the safety issues at hand. As the person without cognitive impairment and the person responsible for

Home Safety Checklist

People with Alzheimer's and dementia can live independently at home as long as safety measures are put in place. With some creativity, you can adapt the home environment to support your loved one.

- ◇ Store hazardous items (medication, alcohol, matches, sharp objects, etc.) in a securely locked cabinet
- ◇ Remove firearms from the home
- ◇ Keep the number for the local poison control center handy
- ◇ Make sure smoke detectors and CO2 monitors are working
- ◇ Remove tripping hazards (throw rugs, extension cords, and excess clutter)
- ◇ Keep walkways and rooms well lit
- ◇ Ensure chairs have armrests to provide support when standing
- ◇ Install grab bars in the bathrooms
- ◇ Consider enrolling in a wandering response service

You can find more safety tips online at alz.org

someone with impairment, it is essential that you assess the risks for physical or financial safety and be proactive.

Consider, it is also important to choose your battles. If your loved one's safety is not at risk, then it is generally better to leave well-enough alone. For

example, if he is still able to dress himself, it doesn't really matter if he wears mismatched clothing. The important thing is that he has the opportunity to make his own choices without any endangerment or repercussion. Similarly, if she enjoys cooking but you are concerned about kitchen accidents, it may be better to stay nearby while she cooks instead of banning her from the kitchen. However, if it is a question of driving or climbing a ladder to clean the gutters, you may want to interfere.

Beyond ensuring your loved one's actual safety and security, your role as a caregiver is to ensure that she *feels* safe and secure. If you have recently moved her out of her home and into a facility with memory care, consider making her new home feel as familiar as possible.



Bring her favorite blankets and clothes, hang her favorite pictures, and most importantly—be there for her as much as you can as she adjusts to her new environment.

No matter what stage your loved one is in, productive communication is possible. Maintain eye contact with him as you discuss these decisions with him; use a calm and gentle

tone without sounding condescending; avoid arguing or reasoning; tell him what your decision is and stand firm; allow him to express his displeasure, but do not change your carefully thought-out decision because of his reaction. You may find that he will adjust to the changes more quickly than you had thought.

Always remember that as the primary caregiver, you are responsible for your loved one's safety and wellbeing. Regardless of your relationship, you alone are responsible for making decisions that are to her benefit and will keep her safe. These decisions should be balanced with your striving to maintain her autonomy and her sense of wellbeing.

Pick your battles, but stand firm when safety is at stake.

Tips & Resources

If you notice that your loved one is getting behind on paying bills, is displaying troubling behaviors, or the car has unexplained dings or dents, try using some of these tips:

- ◇ Have an open and honest conversation with him, using tips from alz.org
- ◇ Hire a bill-paying service to keep her finances on track
- ◇ Talk to an elder law attorney about estate and financial planning
- ◇ Call the DMV to request a [driver reexamination](#)
- ◇ Contact a placement agency to help find a home appropriate for your loved one's unique situation

Reach out to the Alzheimer's Association for more guidance and resources.

24/7 HelpLine: [800.272.3900](tel:800.272.3900)