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Diminishing Independence with Dementia

The fourth of July is the day we celebrate our independence as a nation and we consider the freedoms we have in America. Independence and freedom are the cornerstones of the American way and have become part of our central values. Most of us strive to be self sustaining. We are proud of our independence and often, too proud to ever ask for help.

However, as we age, we find that much of this independence begins to fade away as we lose many of the freedoms we once enjoyed due to physical deterioration. As physical health declines, we must rely on others for an increasing amount of help.

Persons with Alzheimer's disease or dementia are faced with the paradox of becoming dependent on others, while often remaining physically healthy. This can create a difficult and unique challenge for care partners trying to provide help and support to their loved one with dementia.

The person with dementia may not want help, or may become upset when they cannot perform tasks as they used to. Care partners often struggle with the delicate balance of when to step in and assist and when to not.

It can be hard to determine at what point someone needs more help with finances, or assistance with personal care



activities like going to the bathroom and showering. The last thing any good care partner wants to do is to take away independence and freedom prematurely, but at some point taking control is necessary, especially when the independence becomes a safety concern.

Below are some ideas to consider when determining how much help and assistance to provide to a loved one with cognitive impairment.

- **FIRST**—Is the issue at hand a safety risk? How severe is the risk and how likely is the risk to occur?
- Carefully consider the situation and your own understanding of the person's abilities. Ask yourself, "Do I really know how much the person with dementia can do on their own?" If you do not know, then consider observing the activity being done independently

before taking action to assist.

- Look for solutions. Ask yourself if there is anything you can do to turn this activity into one that your loved one can do independently? Examples: remove unnecessary bottles in the shower and switch to an all in one shampoo, conditioner, and body wash; lay out two appropriate options for clothing on the bed to allow for choice.
- Then transition. This means *slowly* changing things. Maybe you first begin helping dad with finances, then you pay bills together, then later on you take over managing the finances. People adjust better when change is not forced on them and when it's given in smaller doses over a period of time.

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Caregiver Tips

Dressing

💡 Simplify choices. A person may panic if clothing choices become overwhelming. Keep closets free of excess clothing.

💡 Organize the process. Lay out clothing in the order it needs to be put on.

💡 Don't rush the person; your haste can create anxiety.

💡 Give short, simple instructions such as "put on your shirt" rather than more vague statements like "get dressed."

💡 Choose comfortable and simple clothing. Buttoned shirts are easier to work with than pull over tops for someone who has limited physical strength. However, buttons, zippers, and snaps can be difficult for some to manage.

💡 Be flexible. If the person wants to wear the same outfit repeatedly, try having a duplicate available.

💡 Offer praise, not criticism if clothing is mismatched.

- Use the least invasive prompt, or the smallest amount of help needed to complete the task. Just being there to supervise your spouse shower may be enough in the beginning, but then you may need to start using verbal cues *and* one step directions as communication begins to break down. If that is no longer effective, begin showing visual cues at the same time—show or point to the shampoo bottle when saying "shampoo."



- Take the time to think about the problem and stay positive. Make a list of what the person is still able to do. Maybe your loved one can't assemble a model airplane anymore, but maybe they can punch the pieces out and paint the assembled airplane a single color.
- Resist the temptation to do EVERYTHING yourself. It may be easier and faster, but those minutes you save may also be robbing your loved one of freedom, independence, and self worth. If they are still able to do a task, let them. Keep your expectations in check. Things do not have to be done perfectly or quickly. You are not in a race and the goal is not completion of the task, but rather, the goal is quality of life for your loved one.

Written by Jessica Mezzapesa, Care Consultant with the Alzheimer's Association, San Luis Obispo County Regional Office.



For more information on assisting your loved one:

Check out the Alzheimer's Store to see to find products to help maintain independence. www.alzstore.com, catalogs available at the Alzheimer's Association.

Visit www.alz.org and click on *Living with Alzheimer's disease* for more information on specific topics related to caregiving.

Consider participating in the next Savvy Caregiver course offered in your area. This six week program will provide you with a knowledge base to help you provide better care for your loved one. A portion of this course is dedicated to assessing your loved one's abilities and strengths to help identify effective strategies to cope with their diminishing cognitive abilities. Contact your local office for dates and times or to be put on a waiting list.

Your local Alzheimer's Association Office also has numerous books, videos, and handouts available for you to borrow from our library.

MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return®

A 24-hour nationwide emergency response service for individuals with Alzheimer's or related dementia who wander or have a medical emergency.

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