“Yes, and” Using Improv Techniques to Transform Dementia Communication

Donna Poole, MA and Jessie Poole Macary

OUR STORY

- Alzheimer’s disease causes brain damage.
- Memories of past events are clearer than recent events.
- Be with him in his memories, don’t try to force him into the present.
- Communication comes in many forms – Pay attention!
- Loose light bulb – sometimes he seems normal other times he is completely off.
- Avoid Catastrophic Reactions – caused by arguing, loud noises, confusion, frustration, being hurried, or tired. Adrenalin and other hormones remain elevated in the body for hours. He won’t even remember what upset him, but he will be agitated long after.

MY GAME CHANGER
Alzheimer's disease is a type of dementia that causes problems with memory, thinking, and behavior. Symptoms usually develop slowly and get worse over time, becoming severe enough to interfere with daily tasks.

Alzheimer's Disease - Symptoms & Causes | alz.org
https://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_what_is_alzheimers.asp

WHAT IS MEMORY?

MEMORY CYCLE
Since the early neurological work of Karl Lashley and Wilder Penfield in the 1950s and 1960s, it has become clear that long-term memories are not stored in just one part of the brain but are widely distributed throughout the cortex. After consolidation, long-term memories are stored throughout the brain in groups of neurons that are activated in the same pattern as during the original experience, and each component of a memory is stored in a list of such groups. As a result, if one engram (or memory trace) is wiped out, there are duplicates, or alternative pathways, elsewhere, through which the memory may still be retrieved.

WHERE AREMemories STORED?

Memories are stored throughout the brain; retrieval may be difficult.

- Stress and anxiety
- Being tired, hungry, or thirsty (dehydration)
- Sensory overload (loud noises, bright lights)
- Brain damage
- Needing the toilet or constipation
- Pain
- Infection
- Blood pressure
- Low blood sugar
- Breathing problems

EMOTIONS CAN PLAY A ROLE ON MEMORY STORAGE

EXCITEMENT

WORRY OR STRESS

STRESS AND ANXIETY

- Being tired, hungry, or thirsty (dehydration)
- Sensory overload (loud noises, bright lights)
- Brain damage
- Needing the toilet or constipation
- Pain
- Infection
- Blood pressure
- Low blood sugar
- Breathing problems

WHERE ARE MEMORIES STORED?

MEMORIES ARE STORED THROUGHOUT THE BRAIN; RETRIEVAL MAY BE DIFFICULT

- Stress and anxiety
- Being tired, hungry, or thirsty (dehydration)
- Sensory overload (loud noises, bright lights)
- Brain damage
- Needing the toilet or constipation
- Pain
- Infection
- Blood pressure
- Low blood sugar
- Breathing problems

EMOTIONS CAN PLAY A ROLE ON MEMORY STORAGE

EXCITEMENT

WORRY OR STRESS

WHERE ARE MEMORIES STORED?

MEMORIES ARE STORED THROUGHOUT THE BRAIN; RETRIEVAL MAY BE DIFFICULT

- Stress and anxiety
- Being tired, hungry, or thirsty (dehydration)
- Sensory overload (loud noises, bright lights)
- Brain damage
- Needing the toilet or constipation
- Pain
- Infection
- Blood pressure
- Low blood sugar
- Breathing problems

EMOTIONS CAN PLAY A ROLE ON MEMORY STORAGE

EXCITEMENT

WORRY OR STRESS

WHERE ARE MEMORIES STORED?

MEMORIES ARE STORED THROUGHOUT THE BRAIN; RETRIEVAL MAY BE DIFFICULT

- Stress and anxiety
- Being tired, hungry, or thirsty (dehydration)
- Sensory overload (loud noises, bright lights)
- Brain damage
- Needing the toilet or constipation
- Pain
- Infection
- Blood pressure
- Low blood sugar
- Breathing problems

EMOTIONS CAN PLAY A ROLE ON MEMORY STORAGE

EXCITEMENT

WORRY OR STRESS
TRAUMATIC EVENTS
LIVE DEEP IN OUR MINDS

“Although the Alzheimer’s disease affects neurons (brain cells) in both right and left brain, the ADL functional areas in the left brain is affected more than the right brain such as short-term memory, language, logic, executive function, math skill, etc.”

Dr. Govind Bharwani
Award-Winning Neuroscientist
Wright State University, Boonshoft School of Medicine Dayton, OH

Left Brain:
- Short-term memory
- Language skill
- Analytical skill
- Talking, reading, writing
- Speech comprehension
- Verbal memories
- Math skill
- Grammar skill
- Logical reasoning
- Sense of time

Right Brain:
- Perception of faces
- Emotional
- Music and art
- Environmental sounds
- Emotional memories
- Visual-spatial processing
- Geometric thinking
- Creative thinking
- Childhood memories, prior to puberty

Dlandroisd.com
OUTPUT PROBLEMS
THE ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE

• Loss of speech
• Saying the wrong word “NO” when they really mean “YES”
• Lack of ability to express proper emotions, e.g.: flat affect
• Confusing names
• Mistaking generations, e.g.: grandson for son, son for husband

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

Know the person living with dementia

Recognize and accept the person’s reality

Identify and support ongoing opportunities for meaningful engagement

Build and nurture authentic, caring relationships

Create and maintain a supportive community for individuals, families, and staff

Evaluate care practices regularly and make appropriate changes
Be a good detective

Basic Needs
- Begin with basic needs first: such as toileting, temperature, hunger and thirst

Listen
- Take in the whole scene. What else is going on in the room?

Observe
- Try to figure out what they are trying to say. They may use the wrong words or no words.

Take Time
- Take time to figure out what they want. If you are rushed or frustrated, they will feel it and get more agitated

Good Communication
- Develop trust by using eye contact at their level, proper tone of voice, and body language.

Get into their world

Learn about their reality

Raised by a single mother. Catholic Family.
Moved to Annapolis in the late 1960s & started a family. He was always close to his mother who lived down the street.

Bill
Washington DC

Joined the Navy in 1952 during the Korean War

Left school in the 5th grade. Worked to help support his family.

Join our newsletter for more updates and family stories!
I want to go home!

What do I say? I can't lie to mom!

Oh no, I sold her home!

Where is my baby!

Baby? You don't have a baby!

I fell down the cellar steps last night!

What? No one called me!

I'm tired, lets go to bed Honey…

Honey, she called my dad honey…

I knew you had another woman!!

If I have to go through this every time I'm not coming to visit anymore!

WHAT IS IMPROV?

Improv, or improvisation, is a form of theatrical performance in which the characters, scene, and story are made up in the moment.
1. Say “Yes, And”
2. Don’t be a jerk!
3. Really listen (don’t just plan what you are going to say next)
4. Avoid asking too many questions
5. There are no mistakes
WHAT IS AlzProv?

AlzProv is an easy to learn method for communicating with individuals who have Alzheimer's Disease. By combining our understanding of Alzheimer’s disease with theatrical improvisation techniques, we immerse ourselves in their reality and establish a method for deeper communication and connection.

1. Relax!
2. Really listen to more than just their words: Is he tired, in pain, afraid, hungry, need the bathroom?
3. Put on your AlzGoggles & assess the scene: Noise level, temperature, light?
4. Say “Yes, And”
5. Avoid asking open-ended questions
6. There are no mistakes!
REENACTMENTS

Based on actual events...
They may not recall your name or where they are right now, but that doesn’t mean they have forgotten you.

Rules of AlzProv

1. Relax!
2. Really listen to more than just their words: Is he tired, in pain, afraid, hungry, need the bathroom?
3. Put on your AlzGoggles & assess the scene: Loud noises, temperature, light, television?
4. Say “Yes, And”
5. Avoid asking open-ended questions
6. There are no mistakes!

Questions?

AlzProv.com