Feelings

Feeling sadness, joy, fear, anger or excitement is part of being human. People who have Alzheimer’s disease experience emotions, but gradually lose the ability to recognize what they’re feeling and express themselves appropriately. You can help by being receptive to the person’s emotions, and helping him or her to identify and express them. Remember that the person’s emotional experience is very real, even if others cannot share or understand it.

Be an active, supportive listener

- Allow the person to talk.
- Don’t assume that you understand what he or she has said or meant. Verify by rephrasing and repeating what you hear.
- Look for nonverbal cues about what the person may be feeling or trying to express. For example, if the person smiles, say, “You look happy. Is that how you feel?”
- Be aware that the person will express painful feelings when he or she is ready.
- Simply be present with the person as he or she works through feelings of loss and anger.
- Acknowledge the person’s feelings; don’t try to “fix” negative feelings or dismiss them. Avoid statements such as: “Don’t feel that way.” “You don’t need to worry about that.” “That’s not going to happen.”
- Find a support group to help the person come to grips with emotions — if he or she wants and is able to participate.

Help identify emotions

- Realize that as finding words becomes difficult, so will the person’s ability to label his or her emotions.
- Help the person talk about his or her emotions by identifying them. Make comments such as, “You must feel frustrated” or “You look sad.”
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- Be aware of depression. Alzheimer’s disease and depression have many symptoms that are similar, such as feelings of worthlessness, sadness, crying, refusing to eat or losing weight. If you think the person may have depression, talk to his or her physician.
- Know that it can comfort the person when his or her feelings are identified and acknowledged.
- Share your own feelings. For example, say, “I feel sad too, but we’ll get through this together.”
- Always verify your impressions. A smile may not mean the person is happy.

Help manage emotions

- Help the person control exaggerated or obsessive emotional expressions.
- Remain calm.
- Reassure the person that everything will be all right.
- Redirect the person by changing the subject, environment or activity.
- Acknowledge the emotions he or she seems to be expressing. For example, if the person shouts, “I’m going home!” respond by saying, “You really want to go home, don’t you?” ©2006 Alzheimer’s Association. All rights reserved. Feelings Page 1 of 2
- Allow time for your statement to register. Let the person “check in” to see if that’s what he or she feels.
Feelings

Help manage emotions, continued

- Use comforting and non-controlling statements. If the person wants to go outside, set limits by saying, “I’d like to be outside, too. We’ll go outside after we eat.”

Avoid surprises and create structure

- Emotional outbursts can happen when the person feels loss of control or a situation seems ambiguous.
- Instead of pulling the person out of a chair, say, “We’re going to get up now,” and gently help him or her to stand.
- Don’t ask, “Do you want to take a bath?” Instead say, “It’s time for your bath.”
- Find occasions to seek the person’s opinion and let him or her exercise control, within abilities.

Be positive and reassuring

- Foster positive emotions to help balance feelings of sadness and anger. Repetitive, enjoyable activities and exercise can nurture positive feelings.
- Use phrases that help to comfort and release tension. For example, say, “Everything will be OK.” “We’re doing fine.” “We’ll get through this together.” “I’m here to help you.”
- Give praise for simple accomplishments and successes. Say, “You’re doing really well” or “You did a good job!”
- Use your body language and tone of voice to send positive messages. Maintain eye contact, smile and touch the person to comfort and reassure him or her.

Enjoy, laugh and reflect

- Create opportunities to laugh and smile. A person’s sense of humor may remain as the disease progresses.
- Remember that sharing a humorous situation is different from laughing at a person’s behaviors.
- Talk about happy events.
- Sing or listen to songs that give you and the person positive feelings.
- Look through old photo albums and talk about the pictures.
- Listen to the person’s stories, even if he or she repeats them. Explore the person’s feelings by saying, “You felt happy when you visited your uncle, didn’t you?”