

MANHATTAN VOICE

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How to Make Rituals Easier for Family with Dementia or Alzheimer's

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Anyone who has a relationship with someone suffering from Dementia or Alzheimer's knows that even the simplest tasks in daily life can become true challenges—for both caregivers and the family members themselves. Something as simple as making and enjoying a morning cup of coffee or tea can turn into an exhausting and frustrating experience. Coping is difficult enough, sometimes, we don't need the little joys of life to become a burden too.

As a registered nurse and Associate Clinical Director for [Partners in Care](#), a licensed home care agency and part of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, I know there are countless potential obstacles that can make even daily rituals extremely difficult for caregivers. My colleagues and I have come up with some ideas for communicating that we hope will help caregivers maintain patience and a sense of calm when they are reaching their breaking point. Setting yourself up for success as much as possible will create a more positive and productive environment for both you and your suffering loved one alike.

***Accentuate the Familiar:** Be sure to continually remind your family member or client of the person, place and time. Say “I’m..., I visit you here at home every day” or “Hi Grandpa, it’s me... I’m off from school and am going to be spending this morning with you.” This helps a person with dementia feel grounded in what they know and allows them to feel safe with that knowledge for however long they can.

***Observation is Key:** As noted in the tip above, familiarity can help lessen the frustrating aspects of dementia, when the patient can grasp onto something being told to them or something they can come to expect. Notice what their favorite foods and drinks are, how they take their coffee. Do they like variety in day-to-day meals, or do they like consistency? Also try to notice which times of day they seem to be more clear or confused, and adjust your caretaking accordingly. If you know they are most disoriented during the morning, know you will need to be more repetitive and patient.

***Try New Conversation Tactics:** Since conversations with dementia patients can repeat and tend to loop around again and again, try to listen carefully and then reword the question or emphasize a different point to help keep the communications flowing. Re-clarifying and altering the question slightly can go a long way. Also, though it is tempting when conversing with someone with dementia to fill every silence, sometimes you do have to give the person some time to think before they respond.

*Involve the Patient: Instead of calling all of the shots with simple tasks like getting dressed and ready for the day, involving your loved one or client can help foster engagement and self-respect. You can make suggestions—“It’s hot outside today, so let’s wear something with short sleeves”—but let them choose which short-sleeve shirt. Try this when going grocery shopping too: ask which flavor or which brand of a product they think you should buy. Allowing them to have input in small decisions may allow them to feel a little bit of the independence they have lost again.

*Be Mindful of Your Reactions: Even if your loved one is suffering from a very severe form of dementia, they will still react to you based on your tone of voice and/or facial expression. Be mindful of not letting your frustration show. It is difficult, but take a deep breath, put a smile on, and keep your tone positive. It can make world of difference.

*Know When to Take a Break: Sometimes there is nothing left to do but simply step away for a short while. This is one of the most important things you can do to take care of yourself as a caregiver. If things have become aggressive or simply too overwhelming, walk away for a few minutes (as long as it is safe). Give yourself some time to collect yourself and try to return with a different facial expression.

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