

## Tips for Dealing with a Confused Older Adult

It can often be frustrating for family members and friends of older adults who, as a result of Alzheimer's disease or other age-related cognitive declines, are increasingly confused and sometimes frightened by events of daily life. The way that we respond to such confusion, fear, anger or agitation may worsen the situation even though we think we are being helpful.

Recent research<sup>1</sup> reflects a few basic guidelines:

*Be calm and reassuring* – It is always best to take a calm and reassuring tone with a confused person. Often loud voices or noises can be frightening or agitating and speaking in soothing tones provides a feeling of safety and security. Avoid or eliminate environmental stressors such as jarring noise, lights, or other distractions. Even a lot of clutter in the elder's immediate view can be over stimulating and contribute to an agitated state.

*Respond to questions with answers they want to hear* – It may sometimes seem strange to us to answer the questions of a confused person that do not make sense in a real life context. However, it can be upsetting to the older person to have someone continually try to reorient him or her to a reality that s/he may not recognize. It is best to provide the answers that the elder seems to be looking for and provide the most reassurance – no matter how silly it may seem to us. It is important to remember that for someone with Alzheimer's or advanced dementia there are brain changes that prevent them from understanding people and events the way they used to – no matter how much reminding or reorienting we try and do.

*Speak in short and simple sentences* – Ask one question at a time and allow the confused person time to process the question and answer. Often they have difficulty finding words; you might encourage the use of gesture or pointing as a substitute for words. Using the person's name and making direct eye contact can be helpful in gaining their attention and getting them to focus on your question or statement.

*Be attentive to physical discomforts* – Often aggression, agitation, or extreme confusion can be the result of physical discomforts that relate to basic bodily needs: pain, hunger, thirst, tiredness, a need to urinate or defecate. It is best to check in on these needs and offer ways to relieve these discomforts before trying anything else.

*Nighttime wakefulness* – It is common for those with advanced dementia to have periods of sleeplessness during the night. Try providing more activity during the day so that the elder is more tired at day's end. Avoid caffeinated beverages, large meals or excessive sweet foods late in the evening. Provide the most comfortable, quiet and soothing sleep space as possible. Sometimes relaxing physical contact such as hand-holding might be comforting as long as it is not over stimulating.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

*Resistance to bathing or personal care* – It often happens that older persons with Alzheimer’s develop a fear or dislike of water or showers which they may perceive as threatening. Providing an opportunity for sponge baths or more soothing tub baths may be effective. Allowing the older person to choose among some care options can be helpful as well as just allowing them to refuse care until a later time when they may be feeling more cooperative. Including them in the bathing process as much as possible is also often helpful e.g. “Here is the washcloth to wash your face”.

*Difficulty with depth perception* – Sometimes gait difficulties arise when brain changes occurring in older adults with Alzheimer’s result in visual deficits. These adults sometimes see very dark colors as a hole and they will stop walking and stare down or try and step over or maneuver around the dark space sometimes leading to imbalance. Similarly, they might see white as a hole and may stare at white plates, not even recognizing that there is something in front of them to eat. It is best to serve foods in darker colored plates and bowls in order to create the contrasts which can serve as visual prompts.

*Cueing* – As brain changes occur some of our basic instincts fall away and gentle reminders are needed for such things as simply picking up a utensil to begin eating or bringing a cup up to one’s mouth. If a caregiver notices their elder staring at something, it is helpful to step in with a reminder about the next step in whatever process is occurring – whether it is eating, drinking, bathing. It can be helpful to put a utensil or cup in the elder’s hand along with a verbal cue. With very advanced dementia it is common to have to provide as basic a reminder as “go ahead and swallow now”.

The most critical tip when dealing with Alzheimer’s and other dementias is to remain calm, reassuring, and soothing and to step into their reality with the assistance and encouragement that the elder is looking for or may need in the moment.

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