

Your Health Voice

7 Tips for Caring for Loved Ones with Alzheimer's



When memory fades: Strategies for caring and coping

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HEALTH- Watching a loved one slowly lose his or her memory is tough. Watching that same person forget who you are is downright heart-wrenching. There are so many emotions caregivers go through—sadness, anger, depression, frustration, hopelessness—and they're all perfectly normal. They need to know that they're not alone.

More than 100 million people – more than half the U.S. population – have been touched in some way by Alzheimer's. Managing the [stress](#) when someone you love has memory issues or early-stage Alzheimer's or dementia can really be a challenge.

As a nurse care coordinator with [VNSNY CHOICE](#) Health Plans, my job includes educating family caregivers about how to support their loved one and also how to best care for themselves. Here are a few reminders that I encourage family members to keep in mind when caring for a loved one with memory issues:

1) Know You're Still Needed

There may be times when your loved one is not sure who you are, and this can be frightening for them. It can be difficult for them to trust that you have their best interests at heart, so make sure you come from a place of caring and remind them of your ties to people they do remember. Be patient and kind.

2) Cover the Basics

If your loved one is prone to wandering, don't wait for an accident to happen, begin introducing safety precautions such as nightlights and double door locks early on. Encourage use of a safe return bracelet and consider home monitoring

devices. Ensure that the person with memory loss carries identification and keep recent photo of your family member with you as well. Being prepared can help you relax.

3) Scale Down Communication

Using short sentences and simple words—and a calm, reassuring tone of voice—will make it easier for your family member to concentrate on what you’re saying. Reducing distractions, such as a television in the background, may also help.

4) Get Support

I encourage caregivers to find a support group or someone they can trust so that they can understand that they’re not alone—can help them live their own lives—and be better caregivers. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. You can also visit websites such as the [New York State Office of the Aging](#) or the [Alzheimer’s Association](#) for information that can help you manage symptoms and treatments.

5) Make Time for Yourself

If you notice yourself feeling overwhelmed or frequently worried, are sleeping too much (or not enough), gaining or losing weight, or experiencing headaches or other unusual discomforts, you may be experiencing [caregiver stress](#). Don’t forget to take care of yourself. Getting enough sleep and making sure to allow time to attend to your own needs can work wonders when it comes to easing your frustrations. If you sacrifice your well being for the person for whom you are caring, eventually your own physical and emotional health suffers. Your loved one can easily pick up on negative emotions, making your job that much more difficult.

6) Encourage Visitors

Your loved one may not remember who the visitors are, but simply having company and social contact is a good thing—for both of you. Don’t be afraid to invite friends and visitors over for a visit.

7) Fend off Frustration

It can be frustrating to answer the same questions repeatedly, but saying to your loved one, “I already told you this” or “Do you remember Aunt Sally?” will add to your—and your loved one’s—feelings of stress. Understanding that memory loss is a symptom and that repeated questions are an early sign of cognitive impairment can be helpful when it comes to alleviating your frustration.

For a library of caregiver resources, including helpful videos, please visit www.VNSNY.org/caregiver.

To learn more about health plans that help elder New Yorkers live more comfortably, safely and independently in their own homes, visit www.VNSNYCHOICE.org or call 1-855-AT CHOICE (1-855-282-4642).