

Use 5 strategies to make dementia care easier



Marzena Proszowska-Lambert, Personal Care Clinical Director at VNS Health, October 23, 2023

As any dementia caregiver knows, caring for someone with Alzheimer's or dementia is a challenging and unpredictable role. Marzena Proszowska-Lambert, Clinical Director at [VNS Health](#), shares 5 strategies that make dementia care easier.

Those of us who care for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease or dementia know the familiar if unpredictable route of memory loss, increasing confusion, and difficulty communicating.

Some 6.7 million Americans live with dementia, according to the Alzheimer's Association. The vast majority live at home, cared for by family caregivers and professional in-home caregivers. In 2022 alone, Americans spent an estimated 18 billion hours providing informal, unpaid care to someone living with dementia.

As many working in home care can attest, dementia caregiving is challenging and can be made easier by learning new care strategies and techniques. They include aides like my colleague Sylvie, who took specialized dementia care training this spring and now helps keep 82-year-old Lucille safe and healthy in her Bronx apartment. Sylvie is especially grateful for the training when Lucille is at her most difficult, acting out verbally or physically or resisting a necessary task like washing or eating.

"I talk to her very nicely and let her know that I am somebody who is always there for her," says Sylvie. "I know because of my training that what she is saying and doing are not from her heart – that the dementia is making her mind say and do those things."

Here are 5 strategies that Sylvie and other hired caregivers have learned, through training and experience. They can help family members facing the challenges of caring for a loved one with dementia.

1) Avoid reacting or arguing when faced with verbal outbursts

Remain calm and cool, and gently steer the conversation to neutral ground. Even if Lucille is name-calling or raising her voice, Sylvie takes a deep breath and leads with something positive and loving.

“When the patient is reacting, talking back will make it worse,” Sylvie says. “But speaking nicely and kindly, can release them and bring them back.”

2) Pay close attention to triggers

Many people living with dementia experience agitation at specific times of the day or around certain activities. Pay attention to these episodes and try to discern their triggers. Keeping a notebook can help you reflect on these patterns in quieter times.

Is it mealtime, being in an unfamiliar setting, bathing or changing, or does it involve sundowning, a common symptom of agitation at the end of the day?

If so, try taking a break at these points in time or distracting your loved one for a few minutes with a calming activity. Also investigate alternatives. For example, if your loved one is highly agitated around mealtime, it might help to ask what she would like to eat. An unfamiliar meal might sometimes be upsetting.

3) Find calming activities

Sylvie spends time with Lucille brushing her hair or reading books aloud to her, including children’s books that the grandchildren have brought over. The two sing together and listen to music, especially from Lucille’s favorite big-band era. Sometimes these calming activities can spark moments of joy, such as when Sylvie discovered a book she used to read as a little girl and began acting out the voices – to Lucille’s great delight.

4) Keep your loved one active, physically and mentally

Even as it grows increasingly challenging, look for ways to keep your loved one physically and mentally active. Read a book or magazine aloud or look at photographs and make up stories together about what you see. Moving to music (safely) can be a great source of activity and can lighten the mood and prompt a smile.

“When I’m there I make sure she’s always doing something,” says Sylvie, even if it’s just walking together from one room to another in the apartment. “I know how important that is.”

5) Get support for yourself

Above all, it is critical to know that you cannot give care to others if you do not take care of yourself. That includes sleeping and eating as well as possible, exercising, and finding moments of pleasure in your day.

It’s also important to know that you are not alone. Find a local support group, inquire about caregiver respite services, or learn more about hiring professional home care.

In addition, there are many Alzheimer’s and aging-related organizations that offer resources, support, inspiration, and educational materials about caring for people with dementia.

Some helpful organizations include:

- Alzheimer’s Association – take a special look at Stages and Behaviors
- National Institute on Aging – for resources and support
- AARP – for strategies to help patients and caregivers
- Alzheimers.gov – for support, statistics and resources

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