

Article on Avoiding Arguments with Alzheimer's Patients

"You can't win an argument with Alzheimer's patients but you can redirect them."

"He tells me he wants to go home. We've lived here for 35 years, and when I try to explain to him, he gets mad at me." "I've told her time and time again not to put things in the wastebasket, but she doesn't listen." "My Dad asks, 'Why don't the buses run by here anymore?' and 'How far is it to the river?' When I tell him it's 3,000 miles to the river, he gets mad and says I am a fool. He thinks he's in Cleveland. He hasn't been there in 50 years."

We have a hard time letting go of the old habit of reasoning with our spouse, parent or friend who has been moved beyond reason by dementing illness. It is important to keep in mind that real deterioration of brain tissue is the cause of apparently irrational behavior. Persons with the disease are not behaving this way to annoy or irritate. In fact, they are probably unable to consider the impact of their actions on others.

Seldom will it work to "teach" someone with Alzheimer's disease not to hide things in the wastebasket. Instead, we can teach the caregiver to accept this behavior as harmless and to check the wastebaskets before emptying them.

The woman whose husband wanted to go home learned she succeeded only in frustrating both of them when she tried to "explain" that they were at home. Rather, what worked was to go outside and walk to the corner and back. Upon entering the house a few minutes later, her husband was content. His short-term memory was poor and he would ask the same question again later, but there is an important lesson here: There is no reason why the patient's reality must conform to ours. If Dad thinks he's in Cleveland, what is the harm in that?

If an Alzheimer's patient expresses a request that is obviously impossible, we may be tempted to respond with a reasonable explanation of why it can't be done. A caregiver tells of the time her husband woke at one in the morning and wanted to go to San Francisco. Rather than explaining to him all the reasons why it wasn't a good idea, she said, "All right, but we'll have to get dressed first." And ten minutes into this process she suggested having some ice cream and then watching television, and then going to bed. His poor short-term memory allowed her to redirect him. No one underestimates the stress of being awakened at 1 A.M. and kept up for 40 minutes, but it could have been worse if the patient had become agitated in an argument about the appropriateness of a visit to the city.

Sometimes it helps to become a co-conspirator. Perhaps you have hidden the keys to the car and Dad wants them, or you've come to visit Mom and she accuses you of taking the checkbook she mislaid. Instead of responding to the real situation (why Dad can't drive or Mom's history of losing things and the hurt of accusations), we might agree that the items are lost and offer to help look for them. After looking for a bit, try suggesting, "Well, we'll find them, but let's sort clothes right now. We really need to get this done."

Wait for an opportunity to redirect and always talk positively about the future. "It's going to be all right." Remember, you can never win an argument with an Alzheimer's patient.

Source: adapted from Caregiver Newsletter of the Duke Family Support Program, East Central Illinois Chapter, as seen on the National Capital Area Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association website (www.alz-nca.org).