

# COVID-19 Support Tips for Caregivers

## Contributions from Dementia 360 & Dementia Friendly Greater Pittsburgh

### **Practical Tips: Talking About COVID-19 With My Loved One**

Dementia is a disease that affects a person's ability to process facts. It does not affect a person's ability to sense and respond to feelings. In this time of heightened anxiousness and uncertainty, we recommend limiting how much you share with your loved one about COVID-19. Sharing facts that they cannot process may actually contribute to their becoming overly worried and anxious. Unfortunately, once they become worried and anxious, because they have dementia, trying to reassure them with FACTS about COVID-19 will not help. What will help is your setting the stage by remaining calm and promoting their remaining calm as well.

Here are a few practical ways to do this:

- Encourage them to wash their hands at appropriate times, but not because of COVID-19, because it is a healthy practice we should all be doing. Do not argue with them about handwashing; if it becomes difficult, say, "Let's wash our hands before we start dinner" or even simply "Come with me," as you bring them over to the sink and wash your hands, while putting soap into theirs. Do not say, "Mom you need to wash your hands," which could make her feel like you are telling her what to do, and result in an argument.
- If they want to go shopping, or go home, or go to eat, do not say, "We can't go out because of COVID-19." Instead, use it as an opportunity to say, yes lets go out – and go for a walk instead. Or go for a drive and then come home. Other responses people have had success with are, "Let's get a good night sleep and we'll leave in the morning," or "Right now, the car is in the shop. Let's take a walk."
- Avoid watching the news or listening to the radio updates about COVID-19, which can be anxiety provoking, particularly in the evening, when a person should be winding down for bed. Find calming shows or turn the TV off altogether and opt for another activity.

### **Tips for Good Days**

Being quarantined or "stuck inside" during this time can be frustrating and difficult for you and your loved one but trying some of the following tips may help.

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- If possible, try to stick to a routine. If your loved ones' days are unstructured and unpredictable, life can become even more stressful – and stress contributes to the anger and anxiety behind dementia behaviors. Try using a white board and listing a few of the day's activities that you can then cross off when completed; this will help them know what is coming next. Activities to consider: a time for eating, bathing, exercising, crafts, music, sleep, etc....
- Do what you can to create a calming environment. Adjust the lighting or lower the background noise by turning down the television. Try putting on some low-volume music that they enjoy or using aromatherapy.
- Validate your loved one's feelings...but resist the urge to reason with them. "Yes, it is frustrating that you aren't able to see your friends at the day center today" or "That is upsetting that we can't attend church today. I know that that is important to you." "I wish we could go out too."
- Plan some stimulating activities for them, so they are not just watching TV, sitting with nothing to do, or nodding off. Boredom and restlessness can lead to negative behaviors.
- Be aware of non-verbal signals!! First, check yours. While verbal communication is impacted, your loved one with dementia can still respond to your non-verbals, so try to keep calm and have a smile or relaxed appearance.
- Also pay attention to their non-verbal behaviors. Are there signs they are feeling irritated, angry, frustrated, etc. Do they appear tense or worried? Are they scowling or saying that they are angry? Are they starting to get louder?
- If things are getting tense, take a deep breath (or a few!) to help you relax and think about how to best respond to your loved one. If needed, make sure that you can take a break and go to a safe place yourself if you start to feel irritated or frustrated. Remember that just as this can be difficult for you, it is also difficult for your loved one.
- Reassure them with a touch, a hug, or hold their hand to convey your love and attention. Then find a pleasant diversion. The next pages can help you with this.

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### Preventing Boredom and Restlessness

It is a basic human need to have something meaningful to do each day. This need is no different with dementia, but what changes is your loved one needs YOUR help to think of and engage them in activities.

Again, spending time thinking about some things to do each day will help keep them engaged and entertained, which helps to prevent negative behaviors from coming out. The best strategy is to involve them in an activity for 30-45 min at a time, and then give them a little break to rest their mind. Then try another activity, followed by a break, and so on.

While we can't get out to the mall or a restaurant, **go outside for a walk and some fresh air**. This can be a great go-to strategy when they say they want to go somewhere (and you know you don't want to take them to a public place). If they can't tolerate a long walk, try a few short walks, or sit on the porch for a change of scenery. You can go for a short drive around the area if necessary.

If you can't get out for a walk but would like an indoor activity to use some energy, look on you-tube for some **chair exercises**. Here is a fun example:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKm9lmZO0ik>.

Find ways to **involve them in household tasks**. Bake something... ask them to help you stir. Ask them to help you fold some towels... keep the basket on hand so you can repeat as often as necessary. Ask in a way that makes them feel needed. (i.e. "I could really use your help sorting through these coupons" or "You always fold the towels so nicely—can you help me with this?"). And ALWAYS thank them for their help.

And remember, Amazon still delivers...

- Try some crafts together... Search "simple birdhouse kit," "woodshop DIY wood model kits," "simple spring crafts/ spring crafts for kids," etc. Search Aquapaints for a reusable painting activity.
- Try some new games... search "Montessori match game," or "Keeping Busy Expressions game"

Take advantage of other things you have around the house:

- Sorting activities are great— Sort your silverware drawer, sort decks of cards into colors or suits, or sort spare change

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- Pull out some old photo albums or boxes of photos and spend some time reminiscing
- Try FaceTime or Skype with family or friends.
- Join the Virtual Senior Academy. The Jewish Healthcare Foundation brings you a program to connect with peers through online classes on topics ranging from health and wellness, to arts and music, to current events, and much more.
  - ⇒ Sign up is free at [www.VirtualSeniorAcademy.org](http://www.VirtualSeniorAcademy.org).
- Try watching landscapes with music on YouTube:  
[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=landscapes+with+music](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=landscapes+with+music)
- Try watching wildlife videos on YouTube:  
[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=animal+cams](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=animal+cams)
- Watch a religious/worship channel
  - ⇒ Comcast Channel EWTN 75 Catholic Channel
  - ⇒ Oakmont Presbyterian Church Pod Casts—  
<https://www.oakmontpresbyterianchurch.org/podcasts>
  - ⇒ All cable companies have religious programming available. Check your cable line up for channels.

#### Helpful Ideas for those with

#### Loved Ones living in Long-Term Care Communities

We can only imagine the challenges and emotions caregivers are facing who have loved ones living in long-term care communities and are not allowed to physically be with them at this time due to social distancing/quarantining protocols. You can still be an advocate for your loved one.

- If the staff/team at your community aren't already doing this, please encourage regular calls and video chats with your loved ones so you can hear and see them to provide comfort to them but also for yourself.
- Depending on the degree of dementia your loved one may be experiencing, it is important to speak with the staff/team for personal updates on your loved one's health and well-being.
- Request regular pictures and/or videos are being sent to you or posted on social media to highlight how the community is engaging your loved one. The community may need to ensure appropriate consents/media releases are in place prior to sending any photos or videos.
- Speak with the staff/team and discuss visiting outside your loved one's community doors or windows as a possibility.

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#### **Helpful Ideas for Caregivers needing to utilize Inhome Care**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing to prevent spreading of the illness is encouraged; however, some circumstances require extra support in the home for the physical and emotional safety of caregivers and their loved ones. Besides extended family, some services that may be needed in the home are hospice team members, home health professionals, and non-medical home caregivers. Some things to consider if you find yourself needing to utilize extra support:

- Make sure you are aware and feel comfortable with the agency's protocol for ensuring their staff/team are not sick and that they are minimizing spreading the illness.
  - Some common practices: asking professionals prior to going into the home questions about travel, exposure to COVID-19, experiencing any symptoms (cough, shortness of breath, fever), and taking their temperature.
- Try to minimize the number of professionals coming into your home by requesting the same people throughout the duration of the quarantine.
  - Have a discussion with the agency about replacements prior to the event of needing one so you and the agency are prepared for different scenarios.
- Request individuals coming into your home wear a mask and gloves. You and your loved one may also want to wear a mask and glove as well if it is not bothersome.
- Require proper hygiene protocol be taken (washing hands before and after care is preformed).
- Sanitize surfaces touched by professionals after care is completed as well as surfaces to/from outside the home (doorknobs, railings, light switches, etc...)

#### **Caregiver Support Groups**

We know that caregiving itself can be an isolating experience, and caregiving during COVID-19 where you are encouraged to stay home may feel even more isolating. We would like to encourage you during your time at home to pick up the phone and participate in one of these telephone Alzheimer's and Dementia Support Groups.

The Greater Pittsburgh Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association is hosting virtual support group. We have included a listing of April's support groups in the DFGP email. Interested parties can register for a virtual support group calling the Alzheimer's Hotline at 800.272.3900. Space is limited.

Presbyterian SeniorCare Network's support group that normally meets at Woodside Place will be meeting on the phone instead. You are welcome and encouraged to attend. This group is held on the 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday of every month, from 3:00-4:30pm. Please call 1-888-394-8197, passcode 304125# to join the meeting.

The Alzheimer's Foundation of America (AFA) also hosts caregiver support groups by phone. These groups are held on Mondays from 7:00-8:00pm and on Thursdays from 7:00-8:00pm. To register for this group, please call 1-866-232-8484 (which is the AFA's National Toll-Free Helpline) and ask to speak to a social worker.

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#### **Home Meal Deliveries**

For those older adults who are unable to travel to get food or unable to prepare food, various county Area Agencies on Aging are still supporting the Meals on Wheels programs. Please contact your county's local Area Agency on Aging to inquire about in-home supports, such as home delivered meals.

- For those living in Allegheny County, please contact the SeniorLine at 412-350-5460.
- For those living in Westmoreland County, please contact the Area Agency on Aging at 724-830-444.
- For those living in Butler County, please contact the Area Agency on Aging at 724-282-3008.
- For those living in Beaver County, please contact the Area Agency on Aging at 724-847-2262.

To help you avoid crowds and the grocery store, did you know that a company called Mom's Meals can send home delivered, fully assembled, refrigerated, "heat and eat" meals to your door. Each meal is \$6.99 and you can order in quantities of 7, 14, or 21 at a time. The shipping is a flat rate of \$14.95 per order. They are stable in the refrigerator for 14 days. Also they have different menu options for different diets. For more information or to place an order, call 1-877-508-6667 OR you can go online to [www.momsmeals.com](http://www.momsmeals.com).

In addition, check with your local Giant Eagle or Walmart for grocery pickup or home delivery options.