

Communicating With The Person With Alzheimer's - Hosted Chat Session, March 14, 2005, with guest speaker Jo Huey, MSS, Director of Alzheimer's Residential Care Homes in New Orleans, Louisiana.

<Q1> My Aunt has Alzheimer's, her only caregiver is her daughter. Her daughter is constantly correcting her about everything. I have tried to tell her don't worry about the things that do not make any difference. For example if she had a big meal and someone asks her what she had to eat, she says not that much. My cousin feels the need to correct her about that. What can I tell her to do to help?

Jo Huey: You are correct your cousin shouldn't be correcting her mother. However, it is very difficult, especially for the primary caregiver to not attempt to avoid embarrassment so they correct them. Ultimately, this is more embarrassing for them and causes strife. I usually have the best luck in discussing the manifestations of the disease with the caregiver. Of ten few people understand how the disease works and they think if they correct and remind the person will understand. Would she be willing to talk to me or read my book?

<Q1> I don't really think she would read the book.

<Q2> How do you get your loved one to stop asking you the same question, over and over again?

Jo Huey: I have a dear friend who always said that they used the 1, 2, 3 times and he would change the subject. They are asking over and over again because they truly don't understand nor remember what you just told them. They are probably bored or stressed or both. Change the subject to something more pleasant, reassure them and be sure you are taking care of you. They will pick up on your stress and become more anxious and it is a vicious cycle.

<Q3> How do you overcome initial resistance when you want your loved one to go somewhere they don't want to go?

Jo Huey: If they want to know what time you are going to the Doctor, tell them 10:00 A.M., tell them again, then say I would love to have a cup of coffee or let's go see if the flowers are in bloom. Anything that is interesting to them will often work, when they come back to the original question you can use your same answer again. They won't get tired of the same conversation, you will, which is why you need to find them something to do that doesn't always include you.

This is one of the most difficult things for the caregiver because you feel you must give them too much information and you must get their agreement. Not unlike a child going to school it needs to be something that is done, it needs to be part of the routine and you **MUST NOT** discuss ahead of time. When you are getting ready to go answer in short truthful answers, "where are we going?" "To the car?" "Right down this street? Aren't those flowers beautiful?" "Why are we

stopping here?" "To see our friends." "I told you I wasn't going here?" "Yes, I know, do you want me to open the door." You just keep moving forward, don't argue, don't lecture and don't push, just move forward and let the staff where you are going take the lead.

<Q4> What' the best way to intervene when someone else, someone outside your family circle, comes and creates a situation where your loved one feels uncomfortable? How do you avoid embarrassing your loved one?

Jo Huey: It really depends on what they do. If it is a question such as do you remember me? You just answer. Of course you remember Mrs. Smith don't you mom. Regardless of what they ask you just provide the answer in that manner. If they correct or confront them then just politely and quickly excuse yourself. It is o.k. to say excuse me I need to find the restroom and mom is going to tag along with me! If it is your dad or male spouse you can say, "I am so glad you stopped by to chat but we must be on our way," or "we promised to call and we are late." It is truly o.k to tell a little white lie to save embarrassment. If your loved one disagrees with you and wants to stay you can Apologize. "I am so sorry mom, but I forgot to tell you that we have to go we have an appointment." Get them away from potentially escalating situations.

<Q5> Is it worth trying a different approach right away, or should we wait a few minutes? I'm talking about when a confrontation arises, or if there's been a change in behavior that throws us for a loop. Is it worth letting things drop and calm down, or to just plow through on another tactic?

Jo Huey: It really depends on where you are. Apologies always work if you can be sincere. If you are angry, and often you have a right to be, you need to wait until you cool down. If they are angry you need to give them a few minutes but some people waiting makes them more angry. Try both and as you practice you will find out what works and what doesn't.

You need to practice, practice and practice and don't they just give you that opportunity. If you forget and mess up just apologize and ask for forgiveness even if you haven't done anything wrong, laugh and start over try again. Be good to yourself and quit trying to be perfect. I'll bet your relationship wasn't perfect before the disease?!

<Q6> At your lecture in June, you talked a bit about bathing. Could you review some strategies for this?

Jo Huey: Bathing is very difficult and if you already have a problem with it you need to do it entirely differently than you have been. This may include having someone else do it while you are gone or having it done at day care, etc. Bathing is very private and many people are modest even with close family members. Focus on the task not the way it is done. Focus on getting clean not necessarily a

shower. "How about soaking your feet, doesn't that feel good?" Hand them a soapy washcloth when they are on the stool and suggest they freshen up a bit. Place it where it needs to go, have some gloves handy so you can get it out of the stool!! Start small and work up, it needs to be pleasant, not confrontational.

<Q7> I liked what you said about not being confrontational. If the person doesn't stink, is it okay to try at a later time, when the person is calmer?

Jo Huey: Even if they do stink the right time is the right time and the wrong time will set a precedent that is hard to overcome. If you fight about bathing you will continue to fight about bathing - don't start and if you already have change it.

<Q8> I was wondering what you could say about communicating with siblings about your mutual loved one's condition, and getting them to chip in on tasks that are particularly difficult for you to do?

Jo Huey: Sometimes it is impossible to get family members to help. It is often easier to ask a friend. Maybe one of their friends can help, if they understand what is going on. You may have to hire it done. If you couldn't get family members to do what you asked before you had this problem then you won't get them to do it now either.