

Understanding and Respecting a Person with Alzheimer's Disease

It's important to treat people with Alzheimer's disease (AD) with respect. It is vital to remember that they are unique and valuable human beings despite their illness. When people with AD find their mental abilities declining, they often feel vulnerable and need reassurance and support. The people closest to them - including their caregivers, health care professionals, friends and family - need to help them retain feelings of self-worth.

Helping the person feel valued

A person with AD needs to feel respected and valued for who they are now, as well as for who they were in the past. There are many ways people can help including:

- try to be flexible and tolerant
- make time to listen, have regular chats, and enjoy being with the person
- show affection in a way the person feels comfortable with

Acting with courtesy

It's important to treat someone with AD with courtesy, however advanced the disease.

- Be kind and reassuring without talking down.
- Never talk as if they are not there - especially if you're talking about them.
- Avoid scolding or criticizing them.
- If they aren't making sense to you, don't focus on the words but instead try to determine the feelings they are trying to communicate.
- Try to imagine how you would like to be spoken to if positions were reversed. Some people feel it is okay to be called by their first name or nicknames but others may prefer to be addressed as Mr. or Mrs. by anyone they don't know well.

Respecting cultural values

Make sure anyone with a different cultural or religious background understands rules or customs that may be important to the person with AD. These may include:

- respectful forms of address
- what they can or cannot eat
- religious observances, such as prayer and festivals
- particular clothing or jewelry that the person or those in their presence should or should not wear
- any forms of touch or gestures that are considered disrespectful
- appropriate ways of undressing, bathing, or fixing hair

Maintaining respect and privacy

Try to make sure that respect for the person with AD and the person's rights and privacy are upheld whenever possible. Here are a few suggestions from people with Alzheimer's.

- Avoid situations in which people with AD are bound to fail. Look for tasks that they can still manage and activities they enjoy. Give plenty of encouragement.
- Let someone with AD do things at their own pace and in their own way.
- Do things with someone with AD, not for them, to help retain their independence.
- Break activities down into small steps so that they feel a sense of achievement, even if they can only manage part of a task.
- Let people know they should knock on a person's bedroom door before entering.
- If the person needs help with personal activities, such as washing or using the bathroom, do this sensitively and close the door if other people are around.
- Never baby talk to someone with Alzheimer's disease.
- Make sure that, whenever possible, you inform and consult the person about matters that concern them. Give them opportunities to make their own choices.
- Always explain what you are doing and why. You may be able to judge the person's reaction from their expression and body language.
- People with AD can find choice confusing, so keep it simple. Phrase questions so that they only need a 'yes' or 'no' answer, such as 'Would you like to wear your blue shirt today?' rather than 'Which shirt would you like to wear today?'

Supporting family, friends, and other caregivers

Make sure that anyone involved in caring for the person understands the basic nature of Alzheimer's disease and has as much background information as possible, as well as information about their present situation. This will help them see the whole person rather than simply 'someone with AD'. It may also help them to find conversation topics or activities the person may enjoy.

It may help to emphasize the following points:

- Dementia is nothing to be ashamed of. It is no one's fault.
- All people with AD are unique individuals with their own experiences of life, their own needs and feelings, and their own likes and dislikes.
- Although some symptoms of AD are common to all people with the disease, AD affects each person in different ways.
- AD affects people's reasoning and memory, but feelings remain intact. A person with AD will probably be sad or upset at times. In the earlier stages, the person may want to talk about their anxieties and problems they're experiencing.
- If the person behaves in ways that other people find irritating or upsetting, this may be because of the AD- it's not deliberate.
- The person with AD may remember the distant past more clearly than recent events. They are often happy to talk about their memories.