

# CARING AND COMMUNICATING WITH THE ALZHEIMER'S PATIENT



Estate Planning  
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There are many challenges when communicating with someone who has Alzheimer's Disease. This is because the person afflicted with Alzheimer's disease does not interpret things the same way as a person who does not have Alzheimer's. Additionally, the caregiver is busy with life and has a lot to do. Caregivers usually don't think about the need to communicate in a different way, and this is a mind shift. It is important for caregivers to understand the disease process and the benefit of a different style of communication. If the caregiver can learn to communicate differently, then they will be able to accomplish more with the person who has Alzheimer's, and they can enjoy their life better together.

First, it is important to understand what the person with Alzheimer's is going through. The brain just does not function as it used to, and the person has difficulty keeping track of information, storing information, and retrieving information. That is why they cannot remember what they just did. People suffering from Alzheimer's are in the here and now. However, they may be able to remember long ago, and that is because the brain degenerates in reverse order – from the present to the past, and that is why they seem to live in the past.

To help caregivers, our firm has developed the **ten (10) tools for caregivers to use when communicating with someone with Alzheimer's disease**. Keep in mind, that these tools are not easy initially, and will require patience and practice.

1. **Absolutely, NEVER argue, instead, agree.** This includes not telling the person what they should not do. These are generally for two primary situations: they want to see someone that is deceased, or they want to go home. When you are in agreement, you can manage more together.
  - a. If they want to visit someone that is deceased, which may be difficult for other family members to discuss, instead of telling them that the person is deceased and going down the road of explaining it, and so you are not lying to them, find a sentence of truth such as, "I have not seen him today." Then, change the subject to a better topic.
  - b. If they want to go home: It is a common phrase for people with Alzheimer's disease. A good answer is "so do I." Generally, home to them is a better place in time. The statement puts you in agreement.
2. **Never reason, instead, divert or change the subject.** Giving someone a reason to do something is unable to be processed. It is best to change the subject and divert them.
3. **Never shame or embarrass, instead, distract.** It is important to be aware that the person is impaired, but their feelings are not. They are easily embarrassed even though they don't know what they just said or did, so always be conscious of what your facial expressions are conveying. In day-to-day conversation, it's easy to say one thing and have a raised eyebrow or a twist of the mouth say another.
4. **Never lecture, instead, reassure them.** Shame and lecture go together. When someone is having difficulty keeping track of very recent events, we tend to get frustrated with that person. It is important to remember the person with Alzheimer's is probably far enough in the disease

process to have frontal lobe damage. The frontal lobe is where manners are stored, and it is responsible for impulse control. People will say what is on their mind. If we start to question them about why they said something and they can't tell us, it becomes an argument and they may become aggressive. This is where the aggressive combative stage of the disease kicks in and the person becomes aggressive with the caregiver.

You can apologize even if you have not done anything wrong. You can then go on to something else by changing the subject.

5. **Never say remember, instead, reminisce with them.** When you are talking to someone, don't put them on the spot by asking direct questions. They know that they don't know the answers to questions which is why even yes/no questions don't work very well.

Picture books are great for reminiscing because pictures are taken of things in the past. So instead of asking, "who is in this picture?" you can say, "this looks like..." and if they don't know, they won't be embarrassed, but if they do know, they can be the smart person and say, "that looks like Tom." It is a wonderful reminiscent tool. You go back in time, and can start a sentence by saying, "Well, that time we went to the park in Miami and..." and they can chime in.

6. **Never say "I told you," instead, repeat or regroup.** Don't get stressed. Oftentimes, caregivers try to do too much and get frustrated with the repetitive behaviors and hearing the same thing over and over. When you get stressed, it is time to regroup. Regrouping can be as simple as walking out of the room and coming back again, changing the way in which you breathe, or counting to 10.
7. **Stop saying "you can't," instead, tell them what they can do.** They are aware of the many things they cannot do. Find out what they can do and provide them activities that they can do so they can have meaning and purpose in life.
8. **Never command or demand, instead, ask them or model the behavior.** When you are busy caring for someone with Alzheimer's, you're probably feeling overwhelmed with the amount of "stuff" you need to get done, and may get commanding or demanding, which the Alzheimer's person doesn't respond well to. Due to the progressive nature of the disease, they likely have lost all sense of urgency and time. If you want them to do something, model the behavior. For example, if you want them to eat, sit down in front of them and show them how to eat.
9. **Don't condescend, instead, encourage or praise.** Don't talk about the person with Alzheimer's as if he or she isn't there. For example, you take them to the doctor's office, position yourself next to the person to greet the doctor and say "we have some questions and concerns" so that the conversation includes both of you.
10. **Never force, instead, reinforce.** When a person is forced to do something, their psychological response of "fight or flight" kicks in and somebody will get hurt. Then they are labeled as a danger to themselves or others. Try asking them a question to motivate them. For example, instead of telling them to take a shower, ask them what time they think would be best for them to take a shower.

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*Cassidy V. Petersen, Esq.*



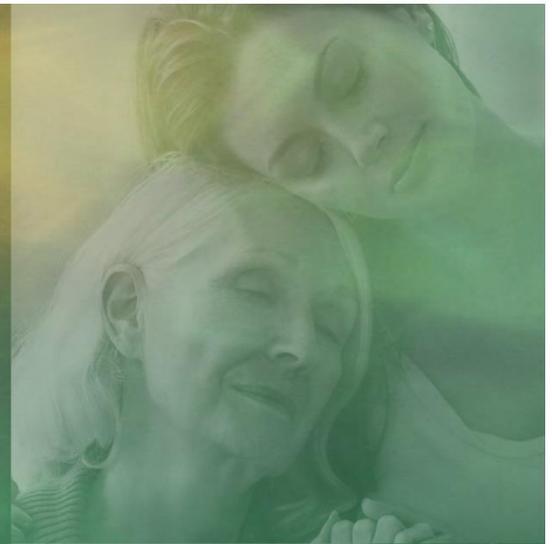
*Robin M. Petersen, Esq.*

## *Estate Planning & Elder Law Center of Brevard*

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