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Ask a Redbird Scholar: What do you do when a parent has dementia?

By Susan L. Hovey September 19, 2019



What do you do when your mom or dad who has dementia no longer remembers your name?

Are you close to someone who is suffering from dementia? If so, you are not alone. According to the Alzheimer's Association, approximately 5.8 million Americans suffer from dementia. Dementia is a term used to describe a decline in mental abilities, such as memory loss, and is caused by a variety of illnesses, including Alzheimer's.



Susan L. Hovey, assistant professor, Mennonite College of Nursing

Dementia is an illness that I carry close to my heart. My mother is afflicted with dementia, and coping with her mental decline has been a struggle for me for almost 10 years. Through research and practice, I have learned how to interact with dementia patients.

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One of the hardest things a caregiver must cope with is being forgotten. As the dementia progresses, a loved one may no longer remember your name. It is hard to know how to react to this situation. The immediate feeling is frustration for both of you. It is important to remember that a loved one not recognizing you does not mean that you have been completely forgotten. Your loved one, in their deteriorating cognitive state, simply does not have the ability to recall.

It is OK to remind the person of who you are. Upon greeting my mother, I simply say, "Hi mom, my name is Susan. I am your daughter." Do not challenge them to try to remember your name by saying, "Do you know who I am?" Challenging their memory can cause anxiety and frustration for your loved one and may have a negative effect on you.

Sometimes, persons suffering from dementia respond well to the sharing of memories, and it may assist them in their recollection. Persons suffering from dementia may remember familiar sounds (voices or their favorite tunes), smells (perfumes and favorite foods), or touch (holding hands or hugging). Although stimulating these senses may not help them remember your name, it may spark an emotion. Persons suffering from dementia can still experience happiness, joy, and love.

I know communicating with a person with dementia seems like a hopeless endeavor. My mother is not able to recall my name or my relationship to her. She does not recognize me because I am not that small child that she cared for so many years ago. Although she may not recognize me, she feels love and knows I am someone special to her. She smiles when she sees me. Our time together is

positive and enjoyable.

When you accept the inevitable progression of the disease, you and your loved one will experience happiness and love while you are together. Instead of mourning the intimacies you lost, it is crucial that you learn to value the time you have left together. Remember, you and your loved one are not alone.

Susan L. Hovey, assistant professor, Mennonite College of Nursing

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