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Tips for Communicating with Your Family When a Loved One is Diagnosed with Dementia

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Caring for a person with dementia can be very rewarding. It can also be very challenging. For family members, the stress can be overwhelming and difficult to deal with and families often do not receive the support they need. It is not uncommon for siblings to disagree on the appropriate care for mom or dad. Arguments arise and communication breaks down. Sadly, all too often, dementia can destroy a family.

Take a minute to think about how you would be affected if someone close to you received a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia. How would you feel about the diagnosis? How would your life change? Which relationships would be impacted?

It's hard to imagine how you would feel until you are placed in the situation. You never know how you will react to life changing news like a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. As a family member, you can be sure, however, that your life and the lives of everyone close to the person, will be affected in many different ways.

Just as each person with dementia is a unique individual, so is each family member. Every person will deal with the diagnosis in their own way. It is normal for family members to experience a wide range of emotions when a loved one is living with dementia: fear, anger, guilt, embarrassment, frustration.

What can we do as a family member to help other members cope with a difficult situation? How can we support one another?

Here are eight tips to help you communicate effectively with other family care partners:

1. Ask open-ended questions. How are you feeling? What are you most afraid of? Listen to the answers with the intent to understand and without judgement.
2. Hold space for the other members of your family to deal with their emotions. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to how anyone feels about the condition of dementia.

3. Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation. Teepa Snow teaches five “I’m Sorry” phrases to communicate with persons who have dementia. These phrases can also be used with family members. They are:

- I’m sorry, I was trying to help.
- I’m sorry I made you feel (angry, sad, etc.)
- I’m sorry. You are absolutely right. I had no right to treat you that way.
- I’m sorry that happened. That shouldn’t have happened.
- I’m sorry. This is hard. I hate it for you (us).

Being able to say “I’m sorry” can help ease the tension of a situation or disagreement and let a person know that they’ve been heard.

4. Recognize when you need a time out. Take a step back and practice taking three deep breaths.
5. Be open to the ideas and opinions of other people. Perhaps someone else does have an idea worth exploring when it comes to caring for your loved one.
6. Be the leader within your family. Learn as much as you can about dementia. Attend a workshop on Positive Approach® to Care. Share what you learn in a kind and gentle manner so that other family members have the opportunity to increase their awareness as well.
7. Offer resources and support. There are people who can help. Try support groups, employee assistance programs, your church, private counsellors, your doctor, respite services, etc.
8. Remember that disagreements are natural. It is how we deal with the disagreements that will matter.

Continued involvement of family and friends will make a profound difference to the person living with dementia. Keep the channels of communication open with one another. Don’t let dementia destroy your family. More than ever, the person living with dementia will need you.