

Seven Blessings for Working With Dementia Patients

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Caring for persons with dementia is one of the most challenging tasks for nurses and family alike. As a caregiver, you can feel alone, rejected, and frustrated. Chances are you will encounter special challenges around communication and providing comfort to patients with this diagnosis. Here are seven tips or suggestions—I use the term “blessings”—to help you help them. In so doing, you help yourself.

It's common for dementia patients to have rapid mood swings. They may not seem like the person you knew before. The littlest thing sends them from contented to angry in a flash. Take a moment to acknowledge this before you see them. Center yourself and resolve to exude calm, patience and compassion no matter what response you receive.

If the patient responds with anger or frustration, realize that it's not your fault. Don't take it personally. Nor is it their fault. They are not the same person they were before. Their brain is different.

1. Ask for Help!

If the patient is a family member, ask for help if you need it. Don't be reluctant to ask relatives to pitch in. (And don't be surprised if some say no.) If the patient is enrolled in hospice, call them and ask for advice if you are in doubt or need support. That's what they're there for.

2. Keep on the sunny side.

Try to be positive and cheerful if you can. If not, be even-tempered and keep any instructions simple and direct. Dementia patients sometimes take a cue from you as to what mood they are in.

3. Be in the present moment.

That way you enjoy any moments of connection and happiness that arise. Think of your interactions with the patient as improvisation. Playing familiar music from the “old days” is a perfect way to enjoy the present moment with that person.

4. Redirect the patient if needed.

The person might want to “go home.” Realize that this means the place where they felt cared for

and safe. Don't argue; the person will simply become frustrated. Instead, improvise and tell them there are lots of steps to get home, that they can't go right now, but it will be soon, even if it won't.

5. Repetition is good.

Play the same song over and over if they want. Tell the same joke you did yesterday. If the patient responds positively, that's a sign such repetition is comforting.

6. Explore memories.

Get out the family photo album. Ask about people in photos. You might be surprised to find some memories surface. If not, that's OK too. You can talk about the contents of the photos and pass the time that way.

7. Look for Grants.

It's not well-known, but grant money may be available to help long-term caregivers for some aspects of their care. The National Family Caregiver Support Program (<https://acl.gov/programs/support-caregivers/national-family-caregiver-support-program>) provides grants to states and territories to fund various supports that help family and informal caregivers care for older adults in their homes for as long as possible. Also check with your state and local organizations to see if they offer grants for long-term care.

People don't always realize it, but dementia is an end-of-life illness. Those who suffer from this chronic disease will eventually stop eating and drinking and death will follow. But the process can be protracted. The length with which one can live with dementia can lead to caregiver burnout.

Memory care facilities that are specially designed for dementia patients can relieve the burden on loved ones. These are sometimes called "memory loss units."

Despite (or perhaps because of) the challenging nature of caregiving for people with dementia, the rewards of connecting with and soothing such individuals are great. If you are able to open the locked door of memory for a moment, you'll never forget it. If you simply have a calm and purposeful interaction with the person, you'll feel you have done a good job and provided care for someone who can't always voice what he or she needs.