



## Caring for a friend or family member with dementia

*by Josie Padro*

Caring for someone with dementia often requires adapting to the physical and cognitive changes that occur over time. Fortunately there are strategies that can help.

Communication may be a challenge as people in the later stages of dementia can have difficulty with verbal expression. They may, however, respond to their senses:

**Touch:** simply holding the person's hand communicates your reassuring presence.

**Taste:** we all have our comfort foods, tastes that bring back happy memories – whether it's a scoop of ice cream, a bowl of oatmeal, or a serving of macaroni and cheese.

**Sight:** going through photo albums is a good way to re-live family stories. It's never too late to start a memory book filled with souvenirs, photos and mementos that have meaning for the person being cared for.

**Sound:** music is an especially powerful way to evoke memories and to set the mood. Soothing music can help with relaxation, while more upbeat music can energize.

One symptom that can be a special challenge for caregivers is sun downing, a period of heightened confusion or restlessness that occurs in the late afternoon or evening.

### **The Alzheimer's Reading Room has a number of suggestions:**

- Keep the environment well lit to simulate daylight.
- Engage the person in a repetitive activity that will keep them busy—folding napkins, stacking mail or winding a ball of wool.
- Help them perform tasks they might have done in the past at this time, such as preparing a snack, or setting the table.
- If the person needs to pace, ensure there is nothing in their area that they could trip on. You may even pace with them at times to assure them they are not alone.

Meal times and nutrition can become disrupted for a number of reasons including sleep disturbances and sun downing. The Family Caregiving Alliance has some helpful suggestions.

- Offer frequent small meals.

- Try serving one food group at a time.
- Check the person is not experiencing pain from ill-fitting dentures or a sore tooth.
- Serve soup in a mug.
- Create a calm setting for meals.

If the person is having difficulty swallowing, notify their physician and request a swallowing assessment. You may need to serve minced or puréed foods. Be sure you know the Heimlich manoeuvre.

## **Resources**

Alzheimer Society of Canada

[www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca)

Family Caregivers Alliance

[www.caregiver.org](http://www.caregiver.org)

Alzheimer's' Reading Room

[www.alzheimersreadingroom.com](http://www.alzheimersreadingroom.com)