

Activities of Daily Living & Other Problems

Sleeping

Sleep is one of the most essential components of our well-being. If you and the person with dementia are to lead a healthy life, it is of vital importance that you both receive adequate sleep and rest. The following are some helpful hints which you as a carer may find useful to enable you both to have a restful night.

Problems with sleeping

Problems with sleeping and changes in the sleep-wake cycle are a common occurrence with dementia. Some people sleep during the day and are awake and restless at night. Some are no longer able to distinguish between night and day, while others are simply not as active as they used to be and thus need less sleep. Trying to recognise the cause of the sleeping problems will help you decide how best to deal with them.

Physiological or medical causes

- Brain damage caused by the condition has affected the 'biological clock' in the brain which directs our sleep patterns
- Illness eg angina, congestive heart failure, diabetes, ulcers
- Pain eg arthritis
- Urinary tract infections which cause frequent need to urinate
- 'Restless legs' or leg cramps which can indicate a metabolic problem
- Depression which can cause early morning wakening and inability to get back to sleep
- Side effects of medication such as diuretics
- Sleep apnoea and snoring
- A need for less sleep as a person gets older.

Environmental causes

- Too hot or too cold
- Poor lighting with the effect that darkness causes the person to become disorientated
- Changes in environment such as moving to a new home or having to be hospitalised which may cause disorientation and confusion.

Other possible causes

- Going to bed too early
- Sleeping too much during the day
- Over-tiredness causing tenseness and difficulty in falling asleep
- Insufficient exercise so that the person does not feel tired
- Too much caffeine or alcohol
- Feeling hungry
- Agitation following an upsetting situation
- Disturbing dreams.

It is important to encourage the person with dementia to be as active as possible during the day. It really does not matter what the activity entails so long as they do not spend long spells sitting down. Activity provides stimulation for the senses, mobility for the joints, exercise for the lungs and assistance for the circulation of blood through the body.



It is also advisable for the person with dementia to keep to a routine of getting up at a regular time. This also applies to retiring at night-time. Routine is highly recommended for those who are confused or who have memory defects.

Coffee and tea should not be given before going to bed. These are stimulants and should be avoided as they contain caffeine which can cause restlessness. A glass of hot milk may help to get the person to sleep. Lavender oil is also useful. A few drops on the pillow may aid sleep.

If possible, a night light should be left on, especially in the bathroom and landing or hallway. In the interest of safety, it may be necessary for the person to sleep alone in a ground-floor room. This arrangement may be essential in the advanced stages of the condition.

Before retiring, it is important for you as carer to create an environment which will be conducive towards a restful night. This might include a certain degree of quietness and relaxation by, for example, playing gentle music. Avoid violent TV shows which can provoke nightmares.

Most important of all, try to get some sleep and rest yourself. Perhaps you have had a difficult day and, in the interest of your own health, you need your sleep. You, as carer, have the person's best interest and welfare at heart. You need your health.

Sundowning

Some people with dementia are noticeably more confused and agitated in the late afternoon or evening (this is sometimes called 'sundowning'). Problems with sleeping and sundowning are often a stage in the progression of the condition that passes.

Some suggestions for coping with sundowning include:

- distraction (eg music, giving the person something to fiddle with, going for a walk, doing a simple craft activity)
- minimising noise, confusion and having large numbers of people around

- being aware that it is happening - plan not to do tasks which agitate the person further and try to be rested and ready to cope

- a rocking chair

- having the person spend less time in bed eg get the person up earlier, or keep them up later at night

- maintaining a set bedtime and waking routine and continue bedtime rituals from the past, for instance, a glass of warm milk, leaving the radio on

- trying to prevent day time napping unless the person seems very tired in the early evening hours, in which case suggest a short rest after lunch.

Don't be a martyr at the expense of your health. If you have been open with your neighbours, friends and family members about the person's condition and should the circumstances require some help during the night, they will probably be happy to assist or give you a break for a night or two. Don't hide the person with dementia away; be open with your neighbours, family members and friends. You may be pleasantly surprised at people's kindness and support.