

# Communication with Loved Ones

According to Dr. John Zeisel, in his book "I'm Still Here: A New Philosophy of Alzheimer's Care," there are five rules when communicating with someone with dementia:

## **1. Hear and respond to the other person's "reality."**

As a loved one progresses through Alzheimer's the concept of reality may shift. Initially, there may not be many differences between current reality and their perception of reality. They may realize it's a weekday but not know how they spent last weekend. As the disease progresses, differences tend to become more pronounced. There are shifts in perceptions of time or days (e.g. thinking it's night when it's the middle of the afternoon). It is best to not try to change their perception - it may only cause anxiety and anger.

## **2. Be honest.**

Persons living with Alzheimer's disease are sensitive to the feelings of others - including whether the person they are speaking to is being honest or not. It is important to be honest with individuals. However, correcting a person each time they say something incorrect is not the intent. Rather, just be yourself. For instance, using the example presented in the 1st rule - you are being honest when you say I believe it's the middle of the afternoon. It is a way of presenting your truth as non-confrontational and respectful. Honesty also includes empathetically responding to the person's definition of reality. It is not dishonesty

to feel concern and empathize with the person with whatever emotions they are feeling at the present (anger, sadness, loss, frustration). Instead of confronting your loved one's perception of reality, try reminiscing about happier times, redirecting to another activity, or distracting your loved one with something enjoyable or diverting.

## **3. Always address the person directly.**

Always talk directly to the person with Alzheimer's. "The person is there. The person knows she's there. It is up to others dire remember and recognize this always (Zeisel, 2010, p. 159.)" If people overlook this simple fact, it can increase agitation and anxiety.

## **4. Don't test!**

We ask people for information all the time - sometimes because we don't know the answer and sometimes it's because we want to test someone's knowledge. "Can you tell me the name of the person you met a few minutes ago?" For people with Alzheimer's these questions may feel like a test of memory they may fail. It may also make them aware of just how much memory they are losing. In order to maintain communication and to decrease potential anxiety, it's best to give the answers. "Hi Mary, this is Olivia who enjoys singing with you."

## **5. Don't say "don't." Divert and redirect instead.**

Persons living with Alzheimer's disease may do

things by mistake or be inappropriate, but they may not realize what he/she is doing. Instead of saying not to do something, it is best and more effective to discretely change the subject so the person will focus on other topics.

Taken from *I'm Still Here: A New Philosophy of Alzheimer's Care* by John Zeisel, Ph.D., 2010, pp. 155-163.