

# *Maintaining a Connection*

As a loved one progresses through their dementia journey, many family members express dismay over a loss of connection with that beloved person. “I don’t know what to say,” “I’m not sure she even knows I’m there,” and “We can’t talk the way we used to” are common refrains by perplexed family members.

A recent article by Kristen Gerencher of Dow Jones & Company, Inc., entitled “Don’t Write Off Dementia Patients,” reminds us that there are many ways to maintain relationships with those navigating a dementia journey, even in advanced stages. She cites a quotation by Beth Kallmyer of the Alzheimer’s Association in Chicago, “People get afraid and think ‘I don’t know what I’m going to say or do.’” People with dementia may not react the way they did before they got sick, but they still need company and stimulation, she says.

“You might see their eyes light up,” Ms. Kallmyer says. “They may be able to smile, make a joke, engage you in a way that surprises you.” Above all, just finding a

way to be with the affected person in a congenial way is the most important objective—even if the interactions experienced are different from those enjoyed in the past. The article provided examples of new ways families can engage their loved ones, such as portraiture drawing, musical interactions, cooking and even washing dishes.

To maintain engagement with a loved one living with dementia, concentrate on the simple things. Especially as the disease progresses, try to engage in activities that don’t rely on a specific skill set or that require a great deal of communication. Often the process of being physically close, emotionally available and cognitively open to life’s small pleasures (i.e. hearing a favorite song, eating ice cream, feeling the sun’s warmth, watching children play, etc.) will allow us to maintain a connection. Most importantly, have confidence in knowing that, even if your loved one may not be able to show it, he/she knows that you are there.