

## How to Comfort People with Severe Memory Loss

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### SPEAKING TO FEELINGS

The nonverbal sensing ability in people with severe memory loss is frequently as keen as that possessed by young children. Instead of listening to loved ones' words, people with dementia react to the anxiety in someone's tone of voice, body posture, and facial expression. Learning to speak to feelings takes practice, but it can be much more effective than relying on words alone. Caregivers may need to separate themselves from the agitated person for a few minutes to compose themselves and master their own feelings before trying to calm their relative through a soothing voice, relaxed posture, and serene facial expression.

### PAST AS PRESENT

It is usually not fruitful to try to force currently accurate information on someone whose thoughts are focused in another time and who is consequently uninterested in "reality" as known by family members. For example, if the person speaks happily about deceased relatives as if they are still alive, there is no point in making the person experience fresh grief. However, if the person asks directly whether a deceased loved one is still alive, then it is important to give accurate information. Families must listen closely to distinguish reality testing from speech which moves back and forth in time without concern for current information.

### SUNDOWNING: AGITATION DURING THE TRANSITION FROM DAY TO NIGHT

When the sun begins to go down, people with severe memory loss often become more confused and agitated. This problem is so common that it has been termed "sundowning." Solutions tend to vary from person to person, and sometimes from night to night for the same person. One response is to turn up the lights and play music, thereby increasing the amount of stimulation in the environment. Some people need to be taken for a brisk walk outside in order to release their anxiety through exercise. Others become calmer after a hot bath, a back rub, and/or a glass of warm milk.

### ENDLESSLY REPEATED QUESTIONS

Respond to the emotional tone behind the question, rather than to its content. Reassure the person with a touch on her shoulder and affirm that everything has been taken care of. Then, distract the person by switching the conversation to another topic. Reassurance on an emotional level combined with touch may be more effective than facts for soothing feelings of fear or loneliness.

### CONFABULATION: FILLING IN GAPS IN MEMORY WITH INVENTED INFORMATION

People with dementia are not lying when they say things that are not true. They are trying to make sense of circumstances altered by memory loss.

Adapted from: Lustbader and Hooyman, Taking Care of Aging Family Members, Revised Edition, Free Press, 1994