

Transportation

Suzann Ogland-Hand, PhD

“My mom has Alzheimer’s Disease. She used to like to go on drives in the country, or go out to eat. But over the past few months, it seems like we end up with a big problem surrounding trips in the car – she gets upset or disoriented. I find I’m only taking her out for critical appointments, to the doctor, for example. Do you have any suggestions?”

You are not alone

Many adults find themselves faced with responsibilities of caring for aging relatives. It is helpful to know you are not alone. Situations with traveling and transportation challenges frequently arise.

Sometimes difficulties with handling a walker or wheelchair, or agitation in a loved one may cause some family caregivers to stop transporting their loved ones, or only take them for the most essential appointments. This can lead to frustration and eventually isolation for both family caregivers and their loved ones.

Multiple strategies

Most caregivers must try multiple strategies. It’s not uncommon to find that what works today may not work tomorrow. Know that trial-and-error is part of the method. Remember, too, that there is almost always a solution and a way to make every care trip easier. (See Terry Azkoul’s article, “Top 10 Tips for Addressing Transportation Issues for Caregivers” in this issue).

Communication

Communication includes both the verbal and non-verbal exchanges between you and your loved one. Our own frustration and worries can have a negative impact on understanding, patience, and tolerance. Keep in mind that as a caregiver, you are really in the best place to set the tone for what these interactions will be like. When traveling, as with any interaction with your loved one, it’s important to stay calm and be patient. This is a key for success.

Compared to communication between acquaintances, communication between family members can more easily become emotional. We often react to the present moment based in the context we’ve had over the years with our family members. In order to be the most helpful during times of transportation, stay focused on the present. Use self-talk to remind yourself to “go slow,” “pace yourself” and “take one step at a time.”

Preventing Agitation

Empathizing with your loved one facilitates good communication. This means putting yourself in your mother’s place, thinking about how she might experience things. Offering verbal support during these particular instances can help ease her fears and minimize her discomfort. Avoid arguing with your loved one. And remember to stay calm.

The environment of the vehicle itself (car, van, etc.) can be a source of agitation. A practical tip is to assess the temperature beforehand and try to keep it comfortable, to the extent possible. Keep your vehicle clutter-free, and reduce glare on bright sunny days.

Plan ahead to have needed supplies available. Relaxing music can be helpful, both for you and your mother. Sunglasses reduce glare. Photos or food may be used as distracters during the ride.

More resources

If you want more information about resources here in Kent County, the Caregiver Resource Network can help. Their web page (www.caregiverresource.net) can provide you with information about local programs and services, fact sheets, and a questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616.456.5664), HHS Health Options (616.285.2590), Senior Neighbors (616.459.6019), or Gerontology Network (616.771.9748) for more help. If you want more information specifically about dementia, call your local Alzheimer's Association (800.893.8365).

Send your caregiving questions to: Dr. Suzann Ogland-Hand, Caregiver's Corner, Pine Rest (MC), PO Box 165, Grand Rapids, MI 49501-0165, or email at suzann.ogland-hand@pinerest.org.

Reference: Easter Seals "Transportation Solutions for Caregivers" (2003).

Column written by Suzann Ogland-Hand, PhD, clinical geropsychologist at Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services, and member of Caregiver Resource Network, a partnership of Kent County organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Please send your caregiving questions to suzann.ogland-hand@pinerest.org, and look for the Caregiver's Corner in the next edition of Mature Lifestyles.