

Caregiver's Corner Column (December 2012)

“Taking Control” as a Dementia Disorder Progresses

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Does this story sound familiar? Joan is caring for her husband Ted who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease two years ago. Ted does pretty well with reminders and Joan's support but lately he has been unable to consistently do simple things like start the lawn mower. Ted has always done all the yard work but now whenever he's working out in the yard, Joan finds herself looking out the window to make sure everything is all right. If she tries to help with the yard, he soon becomes frustrated and tells her to go into the house, stating he doesn't like to be watched. Joan doesn't know what to do; she doesn't mind helping her husband that is if he'd let her. He takes such pride in caring for “his” yard she wouldn't want to take that away from him. But she wonders—is he safe using power tools that he no longer knows how to start?

Although Joan and Ted's story is unique to their experience, caregivers like Joan know the uncertainty that comes with trying to help a person with dementia without over protecting. This dilemma is a common source of conflict because as the dementia progresses the person with the disorder will become less aware of their limitations and the impact of those limitations on their health and safety. Furthermore, caregivers soon realize that it is futile to attempt to convince the person that they need help because the ability to use cause and effect reasoning is often lost early in the disease process, so that any discussion of a caregiver's concerns can quickly turn into an argument that the caregiver will never win.

In addition, the person's lack of reasoned thought, along with the loss of other important cognitive functions, can impact the person's ability make good judgments concerning their relationships with significant others. This often causes the person with dementia to appear stubborn, self-centered, suspicious, and angry, when in reality they are experiencing some of the most devastating symptoms of the brain damage caused by their disease. The person's relationships with significant others who don't know about the disease process are often strained especially if the person's language skills remain relatively intact—which is often the case. Family members tend to think the person can't be that bad if they are still able to make arguments no matter how many of those arguments don't make sense.

So what's a caregiver like Joan to do?

As a dementia disorder progresses caregivers needs to step back and objectively evaluate the person's limitations and remaining abilities. This is the first step in taking control of the situation. However in order to do this well, caregivers need to educate themselves about the disease process. Most caregivers start by talking with their person's doctor; looking online for more information; attending a dementia caregiver class, and/or attending a support group to talk with other family caregivers. Caregivers state that as they learn more about what is happening to their family member they feel more confident taking control—recognizing that by providing appropriate support and structure for the person with dementia, they actually provide a foundation for their family member to feel more secure and comfortable, despite the progression

of the disease. In other words, by taking control the caregiver helps the care recipient feel more comfortable, secure, and in control.

Caregivers who learn strategies to help their person continue to use their remaining skills while adapting the environment to meet the person's needs increase the likelihood that confusion and frustration are kept mostly at bay, and that when these common problems of dementia do occur, the caregiver knows how to handle the situation so that their family member can be comforted and redirected.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.