Encouraging Independence in Alzheimer’s Patients

by BRENDA VANTA

Maintaining and Encouraging Independence

When you hear a family member or a good friend was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, you probably try to learn everything about Alzheimer’s and support them as much as you can. Now let's look at Alzheimer’s independence.

While Alzheimer’s patients need special care and assistance with daily activities, it is also true that they should be encouraged to live as independently as possible. It will help them be in control of their life while preventing burnout and getting stressed.

Research

A 2012 study featured in Psych Central shows that caregivers may deprive an Alzheimer’s patient of their independence and self-worth, even if they have good intentions and a desire to help.

This study mentioned this problem can happen with all caregivers (the family members or support workers) who spend time assisting a sufferer with Alzheimer’s. The caregiver will try to do everything to help the patient and complete tasks that could easily be performed by the patient himself.

The study describes the story of a wife who always took care of her husband with Alzheimer’s and always completed various tasks for him. One day she went with her husband to a nursing home and saw her husband was quite capable of performing many tasks she thought he wasn’t able to do.

Look for Support

Companies like CCAC (Community Care Access Centre) provide support for patients with Alzheimer's. A case manager (usually a nurse or other health professional) regularly assesses the status of a patient. The case manager will create a treatment plan involving home support workers (who would visit and provide bathing, dressing assistance or respite care for caregivers), physiotherapists (to create a suitable stretching/exercise program), occupational therapist (to assess the need for various assistive devices), social worker, and more.

Understanding How Much Help Someone with Alzheimer’s Needs

Both family members and professional caregivers should understand very well the limitations of the patient by reading the notes and talking to the physiotherapist and the case manager.

If individuals with Alzheimer’s can do some cooking, they should be encouraged to do some (even if the tasks should be broken down into smaller tasks to make them easier).

If the patient can dress or undress, the caregiver should assist with these activities, rather than completing them

while the patient is passively waiting for help.

Tools to Maintain Independence

Helpful tools such as a calendar and clock (or watch) should be placed in the room, and the patient should be encouraged to follow them and get oriented in time. A journal can also help one keep track of daily activities, thoughts and feelings. Use brain exercises such as puzzles or other games to keep the mind active.

In the Nursing Home

As time progresses, the disease will also progress. Cognitive function may significantly decline and the need for nursing care will be considered. As a family member, you can visit your loved one in this nursing home and talk to the caregivers to allow them to be as independent as they can, based on their current status.