



# Alzheimer's SAN DIEGO

## Dementia Skills for In-Home Care Providers

*Seniors Helping Seniors  
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# Objectives

- Familiarity with the most common symptoms of Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia
- Improve personal communication skills with persons with dementia
- Identify the most common triggers for challenging behaviors
- Improve skills for responding to behaviors in adaptive and positive ways
- Identify key safety considerations for persons with dementia
- Understand the obstacles and challenges in caring for persons with dementia, and how to support family caregivers



# What is dementia?

A group of symptoms caused by an underlying medical condition that impairs intellectual function, and interferes with normal activities. Diagnosed when **two or more functions** are significantly impaired:

- **Memory:** short term or long term
- **Cognition:** thinking, planning, reasoning, and language skills
- **Behavior:** changes to mood or personality
- **Physical function:** motor skills, balance and gait, senses

# What is Alzheimer's disease?

A progressive disease of the brain that causes problems with memory, thinking, and behavior:

- The most common irreversible cause of dementia
- Caused by the accumulation of protein “plaques” and “tangles”
- Symptoms and progression vary widely



**Normal  
Brain Tissue**

**Diseased  
Brain Tissue**

# Common symptoms

## Memory

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Disorientation or confusion
- Misplacing things and being unable to locate them

## Cognition

- Problems with language or word-finding
- Impaired reasoning or poor judgement
- Difficulty with abstract thinking and problem-solving

## Behavior

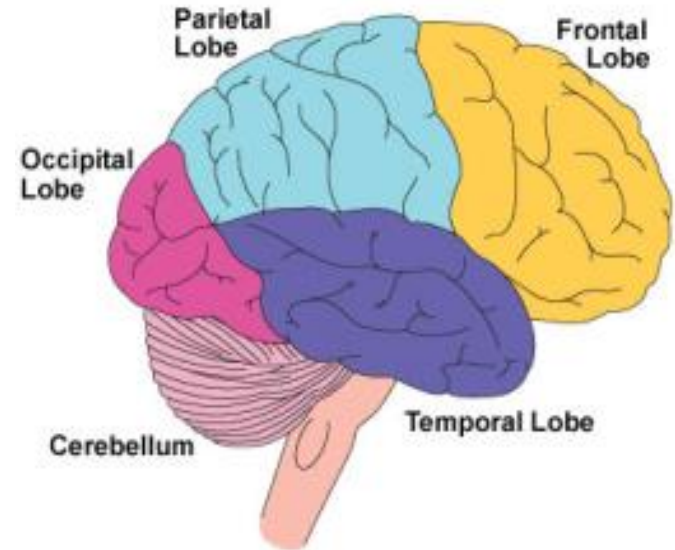
- Changes to mood or personality
- Withdrawal or loss of initiative
- Changes to usual behavior

## Physical

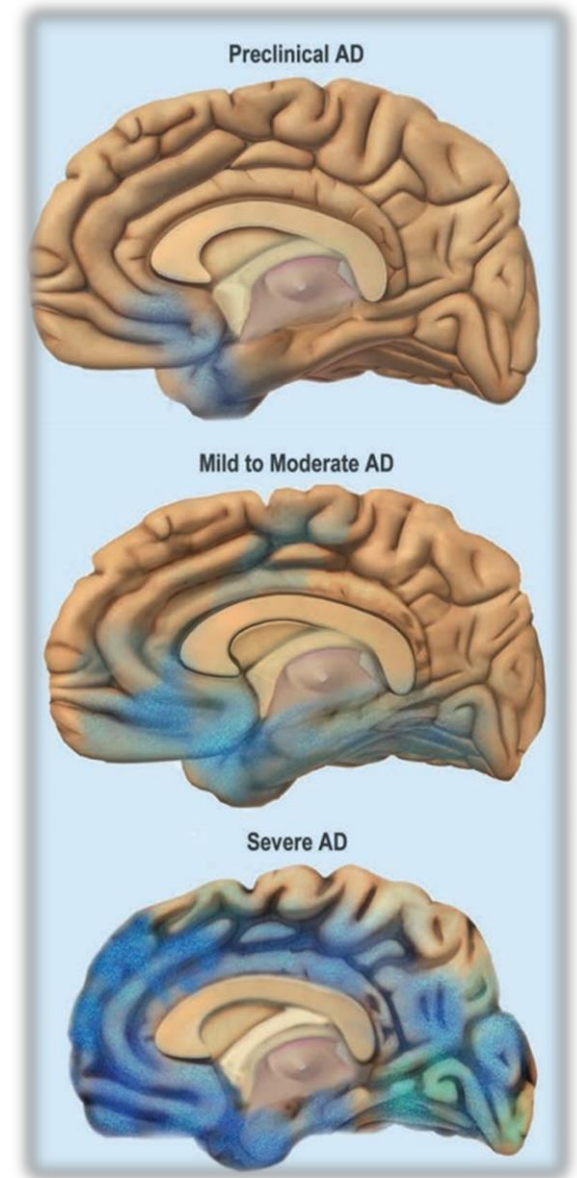
- Difficulty completing normal daily tasks
- Visual and spatial-relationship changes
- Changes to sensory processing abilities

# The brain

- **Temporal lobes:** memory, language
- **Frontal lobe:** problem-solving, behavior, judgement, executive function
- **Parietal lobe:** perception, word and thought formation
- **Occipital lobe:** vision
- **Cerebellum:** fine motor skill, balance, coordination
- **Brain stem:** swallowing, movement



*Keep in mind:  
Communication challenges,  
out-of-character behavior, and  
confusion are symptoms of a  
progressive disease.*



# Changes in communication

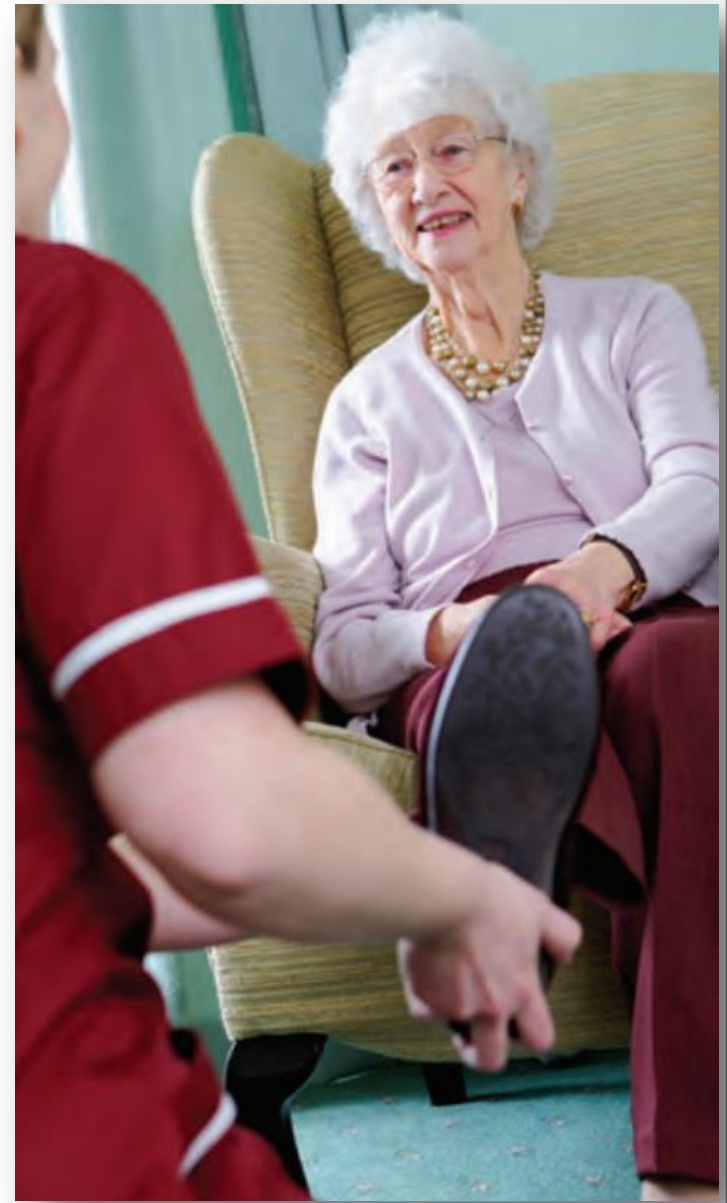
- Trouble finding the right words when speaking
- Difficulty understanding the meaning of written or spoken words
- Problems paying attention while speaking or listening
- Difficulty filtering out background noise or activity
- Frustration when communication isn't working
- Primary and secondary language confusion

*Communication changes are symptoms of a progressive disease.*



# To connect:

- Maintain good eye contact and a comfortable physical position
- Address the person by their name or familiar term
- Introduce yourself
- Be aware of your tone and your volume
- Allow plenty of time
- Consider non-verbal methods of communication



# Communication techniques:

- Use short, clear sentences
- Warm and directive
- Simple instructions and limited choices
- Repeat questions and statements as often as needed for understanding
- Remember that you're communicating with an adult:
  - Address the person directly
  - Avoid “baby talk”

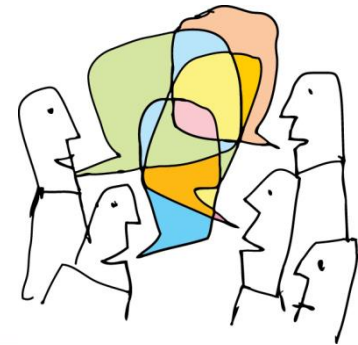


## Do:

- Respond to anger or outbursts with calm and reassurance
- Frame statements or requests positively
- Respond to feelings behind statements, not words
- Remember that kindness may be more important than honesty
- Try again later if needed
- Redirect to a pleasant activity if communication becomes difficult

## Don't:

- Reason
- Argue
- Remind the person that they forgot
- Question or “quiz” their recent memory
- Take it personally



# Some examples:

*“You didn’t tell me we were going to see the doctor! I ‘m not going. There’s nothing wrong with me.”* Instead of: “You see your doctor every three months – we’ve had this appointment for weeks!” Try: **“I’m sorry I forgot to tell you about the appointment. It’s just a regular checkup.”**

Instead of “What do you want for lunch today?”

Try: “Do you want a ham sandwich, or a salad?”

Or: **“Today we’re having your favorite!”**

*“Who are you?”* Instead of: “What do you mean? I’m Mary, I work here, and we see each other every day!” Try: **“I’m Mary, and it looks like we have something in common: I love to wear the color pink, too.”**

# What is a “behavior?”

*An out-of-character response. A form of communication.*

*A symptom of a progressive disease.*

- Restlessness
- Agitation
- Anxiety
- Repetition
- Shadowing
- Depression
- Social withdrawal
- Aggression
- Suspicion
- Wandering
- Disinhibition
- Refusing assistance
- Sleep disturbance
- Sundowning



# Common triggers for behaviors

## Physical:

- Pain or discomfort
- Hunger or thirst
- Need to use the restroom
- Inadequate physical activity

## Medical:

- Pain
- Infection
- Depression or anxiety
- Stroke or other cardiovascular event

## Emotional:

- Fear
- Frustration
- Social isolation or boredom
- The “emotional environment”

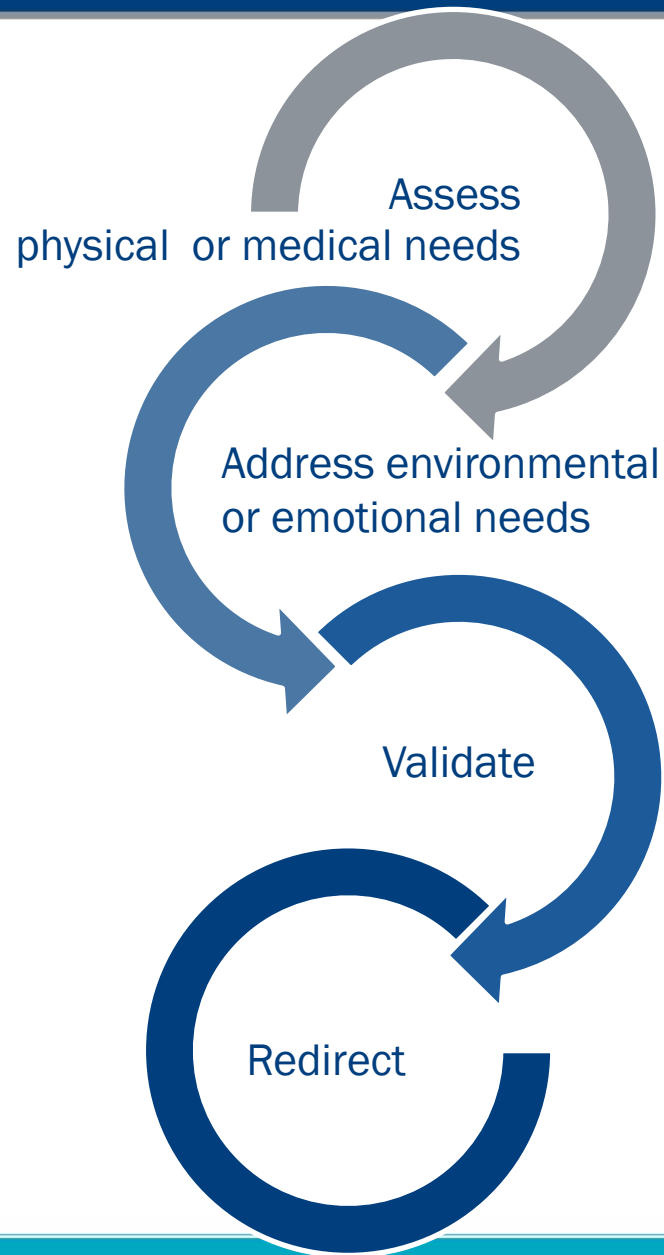
## Environmental:

- Unfamiliar surroundings
- Sensory overload: noise or activity
- Temperature
- Clutter or other obstacles



# Responding to behaviors

- Understand the person in their environment
- **Consider the unique strengths of the individual**
- Focus on skills and abilities
  - Emotional abilities
  - Social rituals
  - Skills and talents



# Connecting through the senses



Touch

Sight

Smell

Taste

Sound



# Case studies



- Consider possible physical, medical, emotional, and environmental triggers
- Understand how the person is interpreting their environment
- Assess for sensory deficits (e.g. poor lighting), difficulty with recognition, or disorientation
- Resist the impulse to correct
- Validate and respond to the emotions being communicated
- Redirect to a different, more soothing activity

# How dementia affects safety

## Memory

- Difficulty completing familiar tasks
- Short-term recall; rapid forgetting

## Cognition

- Changes in judgment and decision-making
- Confusion and disorientation
- Difficulty tracking the passage of time

## Behavior

- Changes to mood or personality
- Unstable emotions
- Confusion or agitation when routines are disrupted

## Physical

- Trouble with balance and mobility
- Loss of overall physical strength
- Changes in visual-spatial perception
- Decreased sensitivity to temperature, pain

# Key safety considerations



Fall  
prevention

Avoiding  
injury

Medication  
safety

Abuse  
prevention

Driving

Wandering

# Avoiding injury

- Appliances: limit access, adaptive devices
- Limit access to sharp objects, tools and equipment
- Disable internal door locks
- Water temperature regulation
- Safe storage of household chemicals
- Food safety



# Medication safety

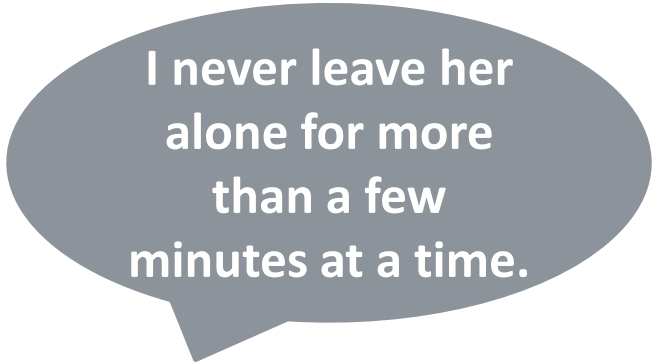
- Use one pharmacy for all medications
- Ask about drug interactions
- Use a pill organizer
- Supervise use of alcohol and other substances
- Take medications only as directed



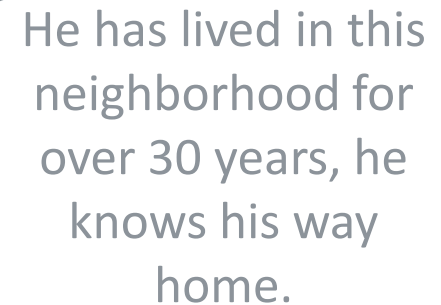
# What is wandering?

- Searching for a person, place, or thing that is familiar
- Escaping from loud noises
- Following daily routines from the past
- Restlessness, repetitive movements, or pacing


*Wandering is common, and life-threatening.*



I never leave her alone for more than a few minutes at a time.



He has lived in this neighborhood for over 30 years, he knows his way home.



I make sure she tells me where she is going.

# Reducing the risk of wandering

- Increase physical activity, and provide a safe place to walk
- Ensure that all basic needs are met
- Chimes, bells, or monitors
- Reassure if disoriented, lost, or scared
- Avoid busy places that may cause confusion and agitation
- Remove items that suggest leaving
- Camouflage doors and door knobs
- Provide visual cues (“stop” signs)



# Safety considerations

- Changes may be difficult to predict
- Personal care tasks frequently trigger difficult behaviors
- Sudden and significant changes may signal a medical condition
- Remember patient and caregiver safety: have a plan
- Caregivers need a support system and a safety net





# The needs of family caregivers

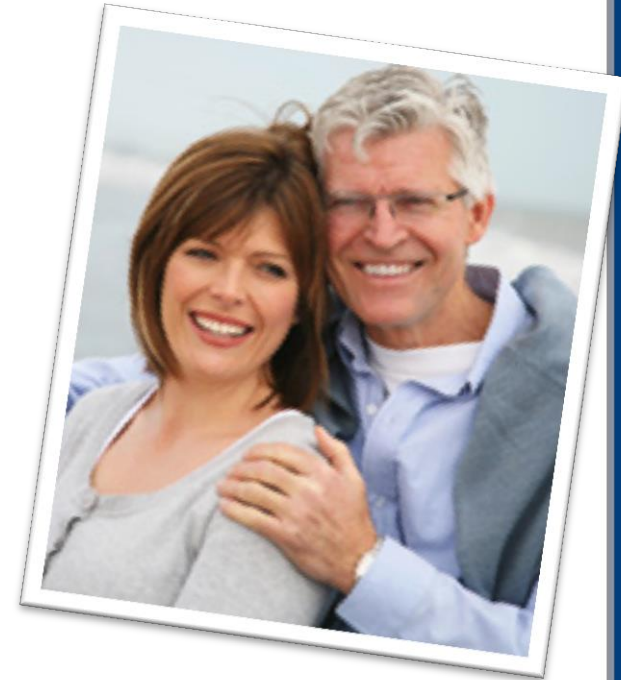
- Information
- Clear and timely communication
- Emotional support: understanding and empathy
- Respite: regular breaks
- Self-care:
  - Physical
  - Emotional



# We are here to help!

## PROGRAMS

- Community Education Classes
- Support and Discussion Groups
- Early Stage Education and Support
- Social Activities: Art, Music, Movement & More!
- ALZ Companions: Free Respite for Families



## RESOURCES

- Alzheimer's San Diego Team
- Family Care Planning Meetings
- Connections to Community Resources