

Four Key Steps

Creating a Strategy for Dealing with Alzheimer's

By Mordo Bono, CSA

WHEN MOM, DAD OR A LOVED ONE IS DIAGNOSED WITH ALZHEIMER'S, it can be devastating. Over a period of time, the disease destroys brain cells, causes memory loss and problems with thinking, and is eventually fatal. Although it may be emotionally difficult to be practical during this time, devising a strategy for dealing with your loved one's disease is critical.

That means shifting into high gear with a plan to support your loved one and to help you become a more efficient family caregiver. Here are some steps to consider in developing your action plan.

Educate Yourself

The first step to a plan is to gain a better understanding of its progression and the types of symptoms and issues your loved one might deal with along the way. Of course, your first source of information is the doctor who diagnosed the illness. Neurologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and geriatricians can all provide insight.

While you may have had many questions when the diagnosis was made, you may have many more during the following weeks. Consider keeping a journal or note pad handy to jot down questions for the doctor. A journal also enables you to keep notes about doctor's visits for later review. Social workers and others, such as certified senior advisors, who are experienced in dealing with senior-centered issues can also be helpful in terms of locating beneficial resources and services.

These resources are also available to assist you with a better understanding of Alzheimer's:

- The Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org) – With a robust website offering an array of information and helpful tools, the association offers a brochure on getting the most from your doctor's visit, medication logs, and even a "tour" of the brain. The website not only provides suggestions and advice, but also links to additional resources such as care providers, programs, and support groups.
- Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center (ADEAR) (www.alzheimers.org)—ADEAR, which is part of the National Institutes on Aging, has a website loaded with educational material and resources, where visitors can learn about research, diagnosis, treatments, clinical trials, federal programs and resources. The site hosts some 8,500 articles, fact sheets, brochures and videos on Alzheimer's.

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Investigate Treatment Options

Your loved one's doctor is the primary resource for information and guidance on treatment options. Since there is currently no cure for Alzheimer's, treatment aims to manage progression of the disease while helping people retain their functionality, independence and quality of life. Options include:

- Psychotherapy may be useful in helping patients deal with the emotional aspects of an Alzheimer's diagnosis. According to a number of recent studies, psychotherapy helped individuals by reducing the symptoms of depression, improving self esteem, and aiding in the preparation of dealing with future losses.
- Behavioral treatments help ensure that an Alzheimer's patient is free from physical discomfort and can generate for a comfortable environment. As the disease progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult for patients to communicate with caregivers about discomfort or pain. Routine medical evaluations, including vision and hearing checks, are an important aspect of treatment, as sensory impairment can create agitation.
- Medications can help slow progression of the disease, allowing those with Alzheimer's to be independent for longer periods. A doctor can determine if the use of medication could ease symptoms.

Build a Support Network

Having a support network is a crucial part of building your strategy for your loved one. As the disease progresses, Alzheimer's patients experience decreased ability to function and independently care for themselves. In later stages of the disease, the amount of care or supervision will increase.

In the initial stages of the disease, patients may be able to function fairly well on their own. While they may experience lapses in judgment or become forgetful, they can still communicate reasonably well and take care of their daily needs—and friends and family are generally able to provide the necessary help at this point.

Alzheimer's patients benefit from being surrounded by familiar environments, people and things, allowing them to live at home for as long as possible—which is preferable. When it gets to the point that friends and family cannot provide necessary care, you can hire caregivers to help provide care. Having a compassionate professional caregiver offering assistance improves the quality of life for those living with Alzheimer's, provides peace of mind for their families, and alleviates some of the physical burdens on families.

Adult day care programs are another option for people who ▶

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need care but want to live at home. Patients are picked up daily by bus and driven to a center where they interact with other seniors while being supervised by caregivers. While there is less one-on-one care, this option provides a safe environment with caregivers standing by.

In addition to caregivers, other support programs—such as Meals on Wheels—are available to those needing assistance. To find the right care options for your loved one, visit the Department of Health and Human Services website at www.eldercare.gov/Eldercare.NET/Public/Home.aspx or call 800-677-1116.



Plan Ahead

Planning ahead is vital to ensuring that your loved one's wishes for their care are carried out. It is important to start planning as soon as possible, especially since it can become difficult to communicate concerns and preferences during later stages of Alzheimer's.

Discussing wishes with your loved one with dementia is the first step in planning ahead. It is important that you understand how they would like to be cared for throughout the rest of their life. Once these wishes have been expressed verbally, you may also want to put those wishes in writing.

Elder law attorneys can help you determine your course and provide documents and paperwork needed to ensure that your loved one's wishes are carried out. A lawyer can provide assistance with advanced healthcare directives, healthcare proxies, estate planning, will, revocable trust, and power of attorney documents. The National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys' (NAELA) website (www.naela.com) offers a variety of resources on this subject. You can also find many of these documents online.

While dealing with a life changing disease like Alzheimer's is very difficult and highly stressful, having your strategy in place as early as possible can help make things easier for your loved one, your family and yourself. Though your loved one is about to embark on the most difficult phase of their life, thinking ahead, and being prepared can help you become a trusted guide, caregiver, and friend during this challenging time. ■