

# Tips for caring for Alzheimer's patients

**By George P. Matysek Jr.**

*gmatysek@CatholicReview.org*

Twitter: @ReviewMatysek

Caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease can be frustrating and emotionally exhausting. The challenge for caregivers is to understand the mental state of Alzheimer's patients so care can be given in the most sensitive way possible.

"You have to be willing to enter into that person's world," said Dr. Verna Benner Carson, president of C&V Senior Care Services and a clinical nurse specialist in psychiatric mental health nursing. "If Mom thinks she's living in 1940 and getting ready for her prom, then spend time talking about how lovely she looks in her dress. Talk to her as if it's happening right now."

Carson, a parishioner of St. John the Evangelist in Hydes who gives seminars locally and around the nation on caring for Alzheimer's patients, noted that the disease progresses in the reverse order as the brain develops – a process Dr. Barry Reisberg termed "retrogenesis."

A person in the early stages of the disease will initially have difficulty with a demanding job or need help with complex tasks such as handling finances, Carson said. Eventually, he or she will need help getting dressed or going to the bathroom before losing the ability to smile or hold up his or her head.

Carson said it is important to recognize that the person with Alzheimer's disease cannot change, which makes it important for the caregiver to change his or her approach to the person who has the illness. Caregivers become what she called "Alzheimer's whisperers" who are keenly attuned to their loved ones.

Carson offers these tips for caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's:

## **Know a person's story**

If a caregiver knows key facts about an Alzheimer's patient's personal history, those facts can be used to relate to the person and better understand why he or she is behaving in a certain way. Carson gave the example of an Alzheimer's patient who was becoming upset as he kept talking about how he had to get his animals in the barn. The man's son knew from an old photograph that his father was a former farmer. With that knowledge, the son assured his father that his animals were safe and cared for - calming the man down.

"If you don't know their personal story, then their reaction to events doesn't make sense," Carson said.

## **Repetition is key**

Since Alzheimer's patients will only tend to remember something for a few minutes, caregivers can use that to their advantage. If a family member with Alzheimer's enjoyed doing puzzles, for example, or spent a lot of time doing laundry in his or her youth, a caregiver can repeatedly ask that person's help in completing those tasks. Such repetition will help the patient feel useful and can help the caregiver manage behavior. Other activities might include collecting and sorting coins or nuts and washers.

## **Bathing**

Instead of insisting on showering Alzheimer's patients (which Carson said many patients find frightening), consider giving them seated sponge baths. Dry them with warm towels.

## **Make use of non-verbal communication**

As patients become more withdrawn, communicate a sense of nurture through touch.

## **Caring for wandering patients**

Make sure the house is secure and disable the stove. Use black or dark brown rugs

in front of exit doors. “They will see the rugs as a hole and won’t walk over it,” Carson said.

### **Be forgiving of yourself**

“This is an illness that would try the patience of Jesus,” Carson said. “If someone can help you, let them.”

Visit [cvseniorcare.com](http://cvseniorcare.com) for more information.

*Also see:*

Letters unlock doors for priest with Alzheimer’s