

Dementia Caregiving in the time of COVID-19

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Dementia caregiving is one of the most challenging roles a person can take on. Caregivers constantly adjust their approach and learn new strategies and information to help support the person they care for. Dementia caregiving in the middle of a pandemic? You can imagine how this complicates the day to day struggles even more. Several dementia support organizations have published great tips and ideas for dementia caregivers during this time, and this month, I wanted to highlight some of my favorite suggestions. If you'd like to read more online, here are some of my favorite sites for great information.

Memory Care Home Solutions www.memorycarehs.org

Alzheimer's Association www.alz.org

The John Hartford Foundation <https://www.johnhartford.org/>

AARP <https://www.aarp.org/>

Try to avoid unnecessary risks of exposure.

Based on evidence and reports from the CDC, COVID-19 is extremely contagious. The CDC is currently recommending avoiding unnecessary risks of exposure such as going out of the home or gathering with other people. These guidelines can be challenging when caring for a person living with dementia as you may rely on others to help with managing care needs. Be smart about who comes into your home and make sure you are following all of the hand washing and sanitizing guidelines.

Routine will benefit both you and the person you're caring for.

Routine and structure are widely considered the best 'medicine' for a person living with dementia as it helps them maintain independence with familiarity. During this uncertain time, mental health professionals advise that routine is one of the best ways to manage anxiety and worry. Try to keep waking/sleeping times and meal times similar each day. Structure activities throughout the day to keep up engagement.

Check into new activity ideas to fill the day.

Quarantine and sheltering in place contribute to the already present isolation that many people living with dementia and their caregivers feel. Consider checking into new activities to help fill each day. Here are some ideas:

- Make your own reminiscence toolkit with items from around your home. Check out <https://www.effinghamalz.org/resources-for-libraries> to get started.
- Inject meaning and purpose into the daily routine by asking the person you're caring for to help with housekeeping tasks.
- Get outside and get some sunshine and fresh air if possible!
- Go for a drive to a scenic location. You don't need to get out of the vehicle to enjoy nature's beauty.
- Limit the amount of television, especially news programs during this time as they can heighten stress and anxiety, and may confuse a person living with dementia.

Manage anxiety and stress.

A person living with dementia can often pick up on nonverbal cues much easier than words, especially as the disease progresses. What this means for caregivers during this time is that it is even more important to manage their own stress, and take time during every day to devote to their own health and well-being. I've suggested to several clients to journal their emotions and experiences during this time, and also practice mindfulness techniques like deep breathing or meditation. Consider meeting with a counselor virtually by phone or video or checking out an online caregiver forum. Moving the body with some kind of exercise each day is helpful too.

Maintain social connections!

Continue to call, video chat, or text family and friends. It's important to feel connected to others and essential during this time. Check in with people who you know may be struggling or could use a little boost in their day. We're all in this together!

Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness (EAAA) is a volunteer-run, not-for-profit organization founded to provide education and support to all families, caregivers, and people with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia in Effingham County and the surrounding area. For more information about Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness, check out their website at www.effinghamalz.org. If you are a caregiver & have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free to call Shannon Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.