

Living with Dementia: The Gift of Crisis

The last few weeks have certainly added stress and survival thoughts to the minds of those caring for aging loved ones struggling with dementia or Alzheimer's. Although each of us is in a different boat, we are all weathering this pandemic storm together. Some are sailing along with ease, but for others, this is a crisis of epic proportions. We hope you know crisis can be a gift. **“You have been offered the *gift of crisis*. As Kathleen Norris reminds us, the Greek root of the word *crisis* is ‘to sift,’ as in to shake out the excesses and leave only what’s important. That’s what crises do. They shake things up until we are forced to hold on to only what matters most.”**

If we can embrace our faith/beliefs and allow ourselves to experience this crisis in this way, it does ease the pressure. Sift away the things you cannot control, embrace the things you can and the things that are truly important. How you respond to the person you are caring for is dependent on your inner strength and how you choose to respond along with your ability to know what matters most -- like the love and compassion you have for that person. Focus on that and the fact that you are doing the best job you can in their best interest. No, it is not going to be perfect; remember, it is a storm! The winds are going to blow, the rain will be intense at times, not to mention the swells tossing your boat around while the waves crash over the deck. **Hang on! Remember to sift.** Keep smiling, hoping, and loving yourself, and you will have the confidence to endure this storm.

To help you with this journey, here are some tips from Stacey Rhodes, Adult Day Program Director and Dementia Care Specialist, that you can put into practice.

1. Adjust your expectations. Having unrealistic expectations can leave you exhausted, frustrated, and discouraged. Don't sweat the small stuff. Step back and take a breath!
2. Focus on what your loved one can do and not what they cannot do. Encourage independence while recognizing limitations. How can you make a task easier?
3. Remind yourself this is a brain disease. They are not acting this way on purpose. Assist them in maintaining their dignity and feelings of self-worth.
4. All behaviors have meaning. They are trying to convey a message because they cannot tell you with words. They may need to use the toilet, be experiencing pain, be bored, be hungry, feel distressed because it is too noisy, etc.
5. Stop and think before you react to your loved one's behaviors. What are they trying to tell you? What just happened to trigger this behavior? It is not always easy to figure out.
6. Step into their world. Do not try to bring them back into our logical world. Trying to reason or argue with your loved one will only bring you frustration and disappointment.
7. Find ways to help your loved one feel empowered daily. Give them choices as to what to wear, eat, etc. Limit choices so as not to confuse them.
8. Live in the moment. Use humor.
9. Get comfortable with taking control. You will need to make decisions that you once made together.
10. Learn to cope with your stress, anger, and frustrations. Caregiving is a roller coaster of emotions. Reach out to family, friends, and professionals. The essential advice we give to a caregiver is to take care of yourself first. You need to be healthy, physically, and mentally, so

you are at your best to care for your loved one.

As you read through these 10 tips, you will immediately relate to some of them. Others may make you feel uncomfortable or think, “how do I do that?” If you would like to discuss these tips further, contact our office. Consider joining our support groups or caregiver classes. You are not alone. St. John’s is ready to assist you. Please visit our website at www.stjohnscc.org or call 618-344-5008,

About St. John’s Community Care

St. John’s Community Care has been the leader in aging and dementia care support services and resources in our community since 1985. St. John’s is an outreach ministry of St. John United Church of Christ in Collinsville, IL. For over 30 years, St. John’s Community Care has focused on ways to help families care for an aging or disabled loved one, with special efforts for those experiencing memory loss or dementia. For additional information about services or programs, visit St. John’s Community Care web site at www.stjohnscc.org, or call 618-344-5008.

###