

How to reduce the stress when caring for someone with dementia

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(Photo Credit: Getty Images)

DALLAS – April 11, 2024 – Caring for someone with dementia or Alzheimer's disease is challenging. In addition to the financial and physical demands, many caregivers are unprepared for the stress of trying to effectively communicate with a loved one who may be prone to agitation, verbal aggression, and hallucinations.

But there are ways to prevent or defuse communication-based conflict, said Izabella De Abreu, M.D. (<https://utswmed.org/doctors/izabella-dutra-de-abreu/>), Assistant Professor of Psychiatry ([HTTPS://WWW.UTSOUTHWESTERN.EDU/EDUCATION/MEDICAL-SCHOOL/DEPARTMENTS/PSYCHIATRY/](https://www.utsouthwestern.edu/education/medical-school/departments/psychiatry/)) at UT Southwestern Medical Center, who specializes in geriatric psychiatry and the psychological symptoms of dementia and caregiver burden.



"Dementia may start with difficulty finding a word or repeating phrases, and it can evolve into increased reliance on nonverbal communication," Dr. De Abreu said. "Communication barriers can be downright scary or anger-inducing for your loved one."

Izabella De Abreu, M.D., is Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at UT Southwestern.

Dr. De Abreu offered these tips to encourage constructive communication:

- **Speak clearly and slowly.** Make eye contact and give your loved one your full attention.
- **Minimize distractions.** Let the person with dementia speak for themselves and give them time to respond to you.
- **Repeat information to confirm it's accurate.** Offer simple choices of one or two items to avoid overwhelming them and creating additional confusion.
- **Ask them to complete tasks.** When it's time to take medication or get something done, ask rather than demand. They are more likely to comply if they feel in control of the decision.
- **Try not to argue.** If your loved one confuses nonessential details, like dates or names, stay calm and let it go. Arguing will only confuse and upset them unnecessarily.

The American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry estimates that about half of all patients with dementia or Alzheimer's are currently being cared for at home.

Caregiving workshops

The Geriatric Psychiatry (<https://utswmed.org/conditions-treatments/geriatric-psychiatry/>) clinic at UTSW's Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute ([HTTPS://ODONNELLBRAININSTITUTE.UTSOUTHWESTERN.EDU/](https://ODONNELLBRAININSTITUTE.UTSOUTHWESTERN.EDU/)) has launched a project with the Geriatric Psychiatry Fellowship Program to help caregivers navigate the behavioral changes and communication challenges of caring for a loved one with dementia.

Free workshops will be offered via Zoom. The three sessions under each topic will cover the same material.

Dementia Communication and Behavior Management

May 2, May 23, and June 6
1–2 p.m.

Problem-Solving Dementia Behaviors and Mindfulness

May 9, May 30, and June 13
1–2 p.m.

Please emma.dahmer@utsouthwestern.edu Emma Dahmer to RSVP.

Behavioral changes from dementia can be more overwhelming than cognitive symptoms, such as memory decline. Over time, the caregiving burden can lead to overmedication of patients. It also can increase the risk of health problems for the caregiver, including anxiety, depression, a weakened immune system, and conditions related to overeating and obesity. It's important for caregivers to remember to care for themselves.

"No matter how much you love your aging family member or friend, caregiving can negatively affect your physical health, mental wellness, relationships, and finances," said Molly Camp, M.D. (<https://utswmed.org/doctors/mary-camp/>), Associate Professor of Psychiatry, who specializes in geriatric mental health. Caregivers should discuss their own physical and mental well-being with a health care provider.

Drs. De Abreu and Camp are members of the Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute. Dr. Camp holds the Jake Tobolowsky Professorship in Psychiatry, in Memory of Helen B. Tobolowsky and in Honor of Dr. David M. Tobolowsky.



Molly Camp, M.D., Associate Professor of Psychiatry, holds the Jake Tobolowsky Professorship in Psychiatry, in Memory of Helen B. Tobolowsky and in Honor of Dr. David M. Tobolowsky at UT Southwestern.

About UT Southwestern Medical Center

UT Southwestern, one of the nation's premier academic medical centers, integrates pioneering biomedical research with exceptional clinical care and education. The institution's faculty members have received six Nobel Prizes and include 25 members of the National Academy of Sciences, 21 members of the National Academy of Medicine, and 13 Howard Hughes Medical Institute Investigators. The full-time faculty of more than 3,100 is responsible for groundbreaking medical advances and is committed to translating science-driven research quickly to new clinical treatments. UT Southwestern physicians provide care in more than 80 specialties to more than 120,000 hospitalized patients, more than 360,000 emergency room cases, and oversee nearly 5 million outpatient visits a year.

