

# Living with dementia

How family and friends can help support their loved one

Mon., March 5, 2018

A diagnosis of dementia is a life-changing event, and not just for the person directly affected. Those closest to the person are profoundly touched as well. It's perfectly normal for all those involved to experience feelings of fear, denial and anger while adjusting to what's ahead. The road is long, perhaps five to 10 years. So it's important for family members to learn how to cope with this new reality and effectively support their loved ones through the changes they will experience.

“You know the individual will increasingly have problems with their memory,” says Elaine Wood, Vice President of Operations for Delmanor retirement communities. “They may lose their license to drive and eventually experience a loss of independence as they can't get around anymore.” Besides forgetfulness, their “new normal” symptoms might include mood swings and other fluctuations in behaviour, explains Wood. How can those caring for them help? Here are some suggestions:

## **1. Celebrate the person.**

They may respond differently at times but inside, the person is the same. “It's so important to treat your loved one with the same understanding, respect and patience you showed them before they started losing their memory,” stresses Wood. “You don't want to lose sight of the individual,” adds Jennifer Beninato, MemoryPlus Manager at Delmanor Elgin Mills.

## **2. Focus on the positive.**

There's no point in being argumentative or trying to impress the person with logic. “They're looking to regain the control and power they've lost, so it's common for them to point the finger at someone else,” explains Wood. “Be sure to be as agreeable and empathetic as possible, then redirect their attention elsewhere by starting a different conversation to get them thinking about something more positive.”

## **3. Be flexible.**

“Let go of your expectations and be prepared to change plans from day to day as time allows. Let them take the lead as much as possible. Remember that the goal is enjoyment, not achievement,” says Beninato.

#### **4. Engage in activities they can still enjoy.**

Keep your loved one as engaged as possible. “It provides comfort and support and allows the person to maintain more individuality and independence,” explains Beninato. Remember what they’ve always loved to do: maybe it’s baking, which you can now do together. Perhaps they loved to paint, exercise, play cards or games. “It’s pleasurable to do activities with someone you love, as well as mentally stimulating.”

#### **5. Adapt the things they can no longer do on their own.**

Be creative about introducing new ways to enjoy the things they did in the past. “If the person travelled, for example, look at old photo albums of trips and reminisce,” suggests Beninato. Other examples: if they used to garden, take them for a visit to a garden centre to engage their passion for flowers. If they enjoyed shopping, consider a short trip to a favourite store. Or if they loved going to the theatre, get some videos of old television shows or movies and watch them together.

#### **6. Take care of yourself.**

Remember your own health is also a priority. “Take care of yourself so you have lots of patience and love to share,” says Beninato. “Do things you enjoy: exercise, eat well, sleep well, find ways to relax like going for a walk or massage, engage in your own hobbies and interests, and take a break from caregiving to spend time with other family and friends.”