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Coping With Dementia: 'Sundowning'

Debbie Selsavage Sep 4, 2017 Updated Sep 4, 2017



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Coping With Dementia

Sundowning is a term used to describe a phenomenon that affect more than half of people who are in mid to late stages of dementia. It gets its name from the time of day when it is most prevalent.

In the afternoon or toward evening, many people living with dementia become more distressed, obsessive, agitated and less easily re-directed away from their anxiety. This personality change may be severe enough to include delusions and even hallucinations. It may include more persistence pacing and exit seeking. It creates a higher risk of elopement, and it may become more difficult to get your person to eat, hydrate and even sleep.

Obviously, sundowning makes the caregiving task much more difficult, and heightened frustration, anxiety and anger for the caregiver only contribute to bad experiences and a potentially bad results. During sundowning, there is a greater chance for abuse and neglect. So, it is very important to understand and recognize the phenomenon, and have a plan and the caregiving tools to deal with it, or even head it off.

There are a number of theories about what causes sundowning, including some pretty sophisticated ideas about the disruption of circadian rhythms causing chemical changes in the brain. For me, it is explanation enough to understand that your person is simply exhausted from trying to get through the day.

A person living with dementia is experiencing sensory disruption and confusion at a level many of us simply cannot understand. The daily events that glide by largely unnoticed by most of us can be overwhelmingly confusing and unmanageable for a person with dementia. Little wonder that by late afternoon or early evening they are simply worn out, frazzled and beyond the limits of their diminished ability to cope.

Let me pause here to encourage you, as a caregiver, to experience the Virtual Dementia Tour (VDT) at your next opportunity. It will greatly improve your understanding and empathy for what your dementia person is living with 24/7. The VDT will next be in Citrus County on Sept. 13 at Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church in Beverly Hills, and Oct. 21 in Floral City. Call 352-422-3663 for more details.

As a caregiver, you need to first learn to recognize the signs of sundowning because — contrary to its name — it can happen at other times of day, though in most cases it happens in the afternoon or evening. Keep a journal, and note when you see the increased anxiety and the exaggerated behaviors described above. This will help you identify when sundowning may begin for your person, which will dictate when you need to take pre-emptive action.

Get your person to rest prior to his or her sundowning time. This can head off the exhaustion that can send the dementia person into an emotional crisis.

Discourage visitors during the hour prior to the time you expect sundowning to begin. This is necessary to promote rest and reduce stimulation.

Reduce noise stimulation, such as the radio or television. Even in circumstances that do not include sundowning, we must be careful about the use of these devices. Avoid news or any kind of loud or violent programming. Avoid loud music. Play soft or soothing music.

Many people with dementia love one or two specific movies; often they are musicals. It does not matter how many times the person with dementia watch these favorites; they continue to enjoy them. These can be used to put your person in a quieter, more tranquil state of mind prior to the period when sundowning may begin.

Pay attention to the level of lighting. If sundowning is expected in the late afternoon or evening, increase the interior lighting and draw the shades. As it becomes dark outside, your person will see their reflection in windows. They don't recognize this as their reflection. For a person with dementia, these reflections will become frightening strangers invading their home and their lives.

Try not to schedule appointments or travel outside the home in the afternoon. Any daily tasks that are difficult for your person should be scheduled in the morning whenever possible.

As a general rule of care, learn, note, and adhere to the schedule of activities that seems less challenging for your person with dementia. Create and try to stick to a daily routine, whether or not sundowning is involved.

Limit caffeine and sugars to the morning.

Learn what can be "beneficial distractions," such as photo albums, fidget mats, dolls, or stuffed animals that your person with dementia seems to enjoy.

Without contributing to exhaustion, give your person simple but "useful" things to do, such as folding towels. This gives them a task to focus on which may distract them from the environmental changes going on around them.

Make sure they are comfortable; that their clothes are dry, that they are not hungry or thirsty, and that they are not too hot or cold.

Validate their feelings. Never argue with them or tell them their perceptions are wrong or non-existent. I know of a case when a person was upset about children playing in the corner of her room. This was clearly a hallucination, but the caregiver simply told the children they had to leave and made a conspicuous motion of shooing them out the door. Problem solved!

Most difficult dementia behaviors are provoked. Part of being a good caregiver is understanding this and learning to eliminate the events and stimulants that trigger problem behavior. This is especially true during sundowning. Keep a journal, learn the behaviors, times and patterns, and take pre-emptive action.

And don't forget that we all deserve the best!

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