

Monthly newsletter for people caring for those affected with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia.

Explaining COVID-19 to dementia patients. How?

by Luciana Mitzkun Weston, Memory Care Specialist

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a health care emergency around the globe, forcing us all to change the way we live. Adhering to some of the new safety protocols can be a matter of life-and-death. Collectively, they are vital to stopping the spread of the COVID-19. Prevention strategies are particularly important to older adults and those with pre-existing conditions. This includes people with dementia. Their caregivers often struggle with the question: *How do I explain COVID to my loved one with dementia?*



DARE (Do not Argue, Reason, or Explain) is the Golden Rule for dementia caregivers who learn very quickly that *arguing* with a loved one with cognitive impairment only results in resistance to care; *reasoning* is frustrating and futile; and *explaining* takes a lot of energy and rarely increases comprehension.

Dementia patients will likely not comprehend the necessity of wearing a mask that is uncomfortable, hot, and restricts breathing. They won't get why you are wearing one either, and will repeatedly ask you to remove it. They won't understand that they should stay six feet apart, and will continuously move closer and touch others. Their social programs and outlets have been discontinued, and they are having a hard time connecting with faces on a zoom screen. They feel lonely and cannot comprehend why their friends and families no longer visit them.

Yet, it is our obligation as caregivers to protect our loved ones and to maximize their adherence to the most current preventative strategies.

Before breaking the Golden Rule – DARE – by trying to *explain* to a dementia patient

the way things are, we should keep these in mind: **(1)** Dementia patients live in a world of fear. Adding COVID-19 to their fears can cause them distress. **(2)** When cognition is impaired, the importance of touch is paramount. Social distance may be interpreted as rejection. **(3)** Your objective is not to get them to understand the pandemic, but rather to solicit their adherence to preventative strategies.

Instead of explaining something we don't fully understand ourselves, here are some better ways of promoting emotional reassurance and compliance with safety strategies:

Say "flu" instead of "COVID-19"

For most people with dementia, learning new information can be challenging. If it is necessary to mention the pandemic, you may want to refer to COVID-19 simply as *flu*. "We are in flu-season" sounds far less scary and more familiar than the bigger picture of a pandemic.

Create a coronavirus-free bubble

Picture your home in a bubble. Inside the bubble you and your loved ones live a full life, free of coronavirus. All you need to do is prevent the coronavirus from entering your bubble. When stepping outside,

alzheimer's association®

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alz.org/CaCentral

Respite Care Grant Program

If you are caring for a loved one and have struggled to take care of your own needs, you may qualify for our Respite Care Grant.

This program, which is generously supported by the Mary Oakley Foundation, provides reimbursement funds to low-income family caregivers in Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo counties.

To find out if you qualify, contact your local county office

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practice all the appropriate preventative strategies (well-fitting masks, social distancing, etc.). Avoid crowds. Thoroughly wash your hands and disinfect your masks as you arrive home. Insist that anyone else entering the home does the same. You have a vulnerable adult inside your home and you must protect them. Your visitors will understand.

Social distancing

Having your home in a coronavirus-free bubble means that those living inside can ignore social distancing and enjoy togetherness through hugging, holding hands, touching, or sitting side-by-side on the couch. When out of the home, distancing is required. You know your loved one better than anyone else: Can they maintain social distance? If they can, bring them with you on necessary errands – they will enjoy the outing. If you are unsure, leave them at home with a helper.

Make masks fun

Masks can be made in a variety of patterns and designs. Find one that matches your loved one's likes, such as those that depict flowers, kitties, favorite football team, flag, or classic cars. Make it a game by wearing a themed mask yourself. Include other family members in the fun, too.

Establish routines

Wash your hands immediately as you arrive home after every outing. Wash your hands together frequently and model proper hand washing.

Avoid crowds and find ways to enjoy the outdoors

Look for safe opportunities to take your loved one outdoors. Take regular walks, visit a park, or share a meal in a car parked facing a scenic area such as the beach, a lake, or a garden.

Listen to their concerns

Don't assume how they are feeling. *Ask.* Listen to their concerns and allow them to express themselves. You may be surprised by some of their comments and by how they are affected by all these changes. Use this opportunity to assuage any anxieties they may have.

Give plenty of compliments

Make your loved one feel good about wearing a mask and maintaining social distance. Compliment on their stylish looks and positive attitude. Let them know that they are loved and appreciated.

Write uplifting messages

Cards and letters can be read repeatedly and provide continuous reassurance. Have family members send cards as well and encourage your loved one to write messages back. This is also a great activity to stimulate creativity.

Make window visits count

For those who are living under lockdown, or for those at home who wish to visit with family and friends who are not part of the household, window visits may be appropriate. Prepare the window space in advance with comfortable seating. Use a cell phone on speaker so that the parties don't have to shout through the glass. Bring a picture to share and talk about. And why not make it a party? Bring treats to share together.

Stay positive

These are times of great social anxiety and wide-spread instability. We are all concerned about the present and uncertain about the future. Dementia patients are experts in reading between the lines and picking up on your moods and feelings. When with them, take a break from all the negativity so that your fears are not transmitted to them.

Attend to your loved ones' safety, never overlooking their primary needs for love, companionship, and emotional reassurance. Do the same for yourself, and we will make it through this crisis.

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WITH THE AUTHOR

Tune in at [Facebook.com/AlzCaCentral](https://www.facebook.com/AlzCaCentral)

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Tuesday, Oct. 6
11:15 a.m.