Caregiving through the Alzheimer's disease stages

What does caregiving look like in the early stage of Alzheimer's disease?

In the early stage of Alzheimer's disease, most people can function with just a little support from their friends and family. The person may still be able to drive, be very socially active and may even work. During this phase, many caregivers feel they are more of a care partner. It is more of a partnership because the person with early-stage dementia may not need much support to carry out his or her daily activities.

People in this stage often start to have some forgetfulness, problems with communication and changes in mood and behaviours. The person will commonly know how he or she is changing and may want to talk to other people living with the disease and talk to other family and friends about what he or she is experiencing. Some tips for caring for people during this early stage are listed in the table below.

Tips for caring for people with early-stage Alzheimer's disease	
Remember the person can still make most decisions	– Remember, during this early phase the caregiver is a partner with the person with Alzheimer's disease – There is a tendency to want to take over the person's life, even if they are mostly independent – Use tools to help the person remember things like appointments, words and names – The goal is to work together to provide him or her with the support that they need to get the most out of life
Focus on safety	– If there is a safety risk with what the person is doing, then the caregiver may need to intervene – If there is no risk of injury or harm, consider providing encouragement and only provide help if the person asks
Don't correct everything	– Assume that the person with dementia is capable of finishing the task – The person may forget the occasional word or do something differently – Caregivers should not focus on correcting everything because this can be very frustrating for the person with Alzheimer's disease
Avoid stress	– Prioritize tasks or actions that do not cause unnecessary stress for the person with dementia – If there is a task that may be too complicated, consider working together to make the task easier
Talk it over	– The best way to prevent frustration is to talk things over and ask when support is needed – Making a plan can make it much easier
Accommodate the person with Alzheimer's disease	– Simple changes such as developing a plan for the day or laying out clothes the night before can help
Encourage a healthy lifestyle	– Encourage a healthy diet, keeping physically active and brain activities (such as puzzles, crosswords) because they may help to slow the damage from the disease

What does caregiving look like in the middle stage of Alzheimer's disease?

The middle stage of Alzheimer's is usually the longest stage for people with this disease. During this stage, the person's thinking, memory and communication will start to get worse.The disease can make it difficult to share thoughts and perform routine and daily tasks. During this stage, the person with Alzheimer's disease will need more support to perform many aspects of his or her life. The table below reviews some tips on caring for a person in this stage.

Remember if you notice any dramatic changes in moods, behaviours, memory or function in a short period of time, it is important to bring it to the attention of the person's doctor.

Tips for caring for people with middle-stage Alzheimer's disease	
Use tools to help with memory problems	– In this stage, the person will have increasing problems with memory, thinking and concentration – Tools such as lists and reminders can still provide him or her some independence
Changes in moods and emotions	– Acknowledge that changes in emotions are normal – Look for the underlying cause of these changes – Avoid disagreeing with the person or convincing them that what he or she believes is not accurate
Problems with communication	– Speak slowly in a gentle tone – Take time to allow the person to share his or her thoughts
Changes in behaviours	– Some people will change their behaviours during this stage – Try to identify the reason for these changes, because they can be a way to communicate a problem – Avoid trigger situations
Changes in physical ability	– Keep things simple (e.g., simple daily routines) – Adjust the routine to fit the preferred schedule of the person with Alzheimer's disease – Adapt anything that could be harmful or dangerous – Seek additional support

What does caregiving look like in the late stage?

The care the person needs in the late stage is extensive and for most people may not be able to be provided by only the family at home. Although the person in this phase may lose their ability to talk, research shows that the core of the person's self may remain. The table below reviews some tips to caregiving in this phase.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. It causes 60-80% of dementia cases.

If you are worried about yourself or someone you know, talk to your doctor. There are tests to check brain health and memory.

Tips for caring for people with late-stage Alzheimer's disease	

Use other ways to communicate with the person besides talking	– The other senses are still active for most people in late stage
	– Consider trying:
	  – Playing his or her favourite music
	  – Reading portions of books that have meaning for the person
	  – Looking at old photos together
	  – Preparing a favourite food
	  – Rubbing lotion with a favourite scent into the skin
	  – Brushing the person's hair
	  – Sitting outside together on a nice day

Get support	– A person in late-stage Alzheimer's disease can require around-the-clock care – It is important to get the support that you and the person with Alzheimer's disease needs to help you provide care
Make sure they get enough food and fluids	– Make sure the person is kept upright for 30 minutes after eating – Change foods to help if the person has trouble swallowing – Encourage the person to feed himself or herself. Finger foods can help with this – Encourage fluids to prevent dehydration – Keep track of their weight
Take care of toileting functions	– Difficulties using the bathroom is common in this stage – Set a toileting schedule to record when the person is going to the bathroom – Limit liquids before bedtime – Use absorbent and protective underwear products – Monitor bowel habits and, if necessary, treat constipation
Take care of the skin	– Move the person around to prevent bed sores and improve circulation – Learn how to lift the person without causing an injury – Keep the skin clean and dry – Protect bony areas like the elbows, hips and skull – Prevent the joints from freezing by moving the arms and legs around
Prevent infections	– Keep the teeth and mouth clean – Treat cuts and scrapes immediately – Get vaccines for the flu and pneumonia

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