

# The Thurston-Mason Senior News

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The Family Caregiver

**Dementia and Time Travel**



Sarah greets her father each morning with the question, "Dad, how old are you?" Today he answers 47. So today he is 47; however, his biological age is 86 and he has mid-stage Alzheimer's disease.

The question Sarah asks her father is GENIUS! Caregiving insight like this does not happen every day. Greeting him in the morning with "how old are you," not only starts the day making a great connection, but provides some clues to how he is relating to the world that day. It is far more informative than the usual question "how are you doing?" – resulting in the usual answer "fine."

During the course of dementia, recent and short-term memory is lost first. Then longer term recall recedes year by year like the temperature falling on a thermometer. One of the specific parts of the brain which accounts for memory loss is the Basal Ganglia, which lies below the cortexes and above the midbrain, and has a role in maintaining a sense of time and also new learning.

So with the failure of long-term recall, fond memories of a daughter's wedding, birth of grandchildren or the retirement trip of a lifetime are lost (to time).

Another effect from losing the sense or awareness of time is increased confusion. We have been relying on a sense of time, night and day, seasons, for all our lives. When we lose time, we also lose context and reference points for our lives. Context is important. When Sarah's father believes himself to be 47, he may think his 60-year-old daughter is someone who might be his mother's age and perhaps relate to her that way.

Besides asking our family member how old they are, what else can we do to help a compromised brain which has become untethered to the rest of us who wear digital watches in our Gregorian calendar world? Here are some suggestions.

An often repeated story of the 80 year old man with dementia looking out the window at his wife, who is gardening, and confides to his daughter, "I don't know who that old woman is, but she sure takes good care of me." The moral of this story is to be aware that the person with dementia may think of you as someone who you are not. This includes thinking you are a spouse or girlfriend and perhaps talking and touching you in a way you might with a spouse. Be prepared with words and body awareness to deflect their confusion.

When you return from a quick trip to the grocery store, you may be greeted with a scolding for leaving them "all day and are always leaving them alone to fend for themselves." When you hear this, and after a deep breath, remember when they lose their sense of time, YOU orient them. They need you or someone they trust to supply what they have and are losing. It is ok to say "Sorry I lost track of time, it has been a while since I saw you" Or "Sorry I am late, can you help me with the groceries?" Apologies and redirection are skills to apply in these situations.

Caregivers, recite this in unison: "do not argue with the person with dementia." It will get you nowhere. Because when it comes to their sense of time, they are always right.

After a lifetime of relying on our sense of time to know when we should sleep, eat or talk on the phone, caregivers become an important source of safety, reassurance and structure which used to come from knowing what time it is.

This article is a service of the Lewis Mason Thurston Area Agency on Aging. For more information about the Family Caregiver Support Program, call (360) 664-2168 and ask to speak with a Resource Manager or visit our website at [WWW.LMTAAA.ORG](http://WWW.LMTAAA.ORG)