

The Thurston-Mason Senior News

A Free Service of The Thurston County Council on Aging

Senior News November 2018

The Family Caregiver

Anger and Resistance

When caregiving for family members who have dementia, you are likely to experience their anger and resistance about some aspect of care. You may be doing the best you know how, but they may still be irritated or angry with how you are helping them. They may also resist your attempts to help them. They likely do not have the words to express why they are feeling that way or what would help them more.

Perhaps some brain science to see what is going on with your care receiver would be helpful. Anger is based in fear and, relatedly, the detection of threats. This function is rooted deep inside our brain's right amygdala. It is part of the limbic system which maintains its function long into most dementing illnesses.

The amygdala is an ancient area of the brain our ancestors relied on to escape the Sabre Tooth Tiger. But for someone who has dementia, it is active and alerts them of your attempts to get them out of their clothes and into the shower. The fact that the amygdala keeps working but at the same time they are constantly losing memory and judgment, means emotions like anger are largely unchecked due to the loss of functioning memory. It can feel like a losing battle going against the instincts held deep in the brain.

Resistance is another emotional



response of the limbic system. Resistance keeps us safe from impulsive or imprudent actions. It is that pause long enough to consider the consequence of speaking or acting in a way you wish may regret. However in dementia resistance it is active but often does not lose its grip because the brain can no longer help them see consequences.

Resistance and anger are both primitive safety mechanisms which just get mixed up due to dementia affecting all but the emotional centers of the brain. Your family member's reaction to your help may start with speaking sharply or rudely to you and insisting they know what and how to do things. Later in the illness, it may escalate to projecting their fear at you, who is now seen as a threat. They see you as a threat, when you are just trying to help them get to the bathroom on time.

When you come up against Anger and Resistance while caregiving, it is good to check in to see whose Anger and Resistance are you feeling?

Are you feeling anger and resistance because of the care you are providing and how it might be affecting them? Emotions can be contagious, like when a trusted friend shares a sorrow or loss. You can feel it just sitting with them. People with dementia are not

immune to feeling strong emotions from others, but do not have the context to understand them.

It may be helpful, while caregiving, to ask yourself "Am I feeling SAFE doing this caregiving?" Do I feel safe doing these tasks? By myself?

All night? Do I feel safe to take care of myself while caring for them?

If, when you ask yourself these questions, you FEEL your Anger and Resistance, you need extra caregiving help or respite to get away for a bit. You may need to get an outside dementia consult. Find a counselor. Let your family and friends know how you are feeling.

If you SEE your care receiver's Anger and Resistance, you may need more education, support, and perhaps an outside professional perspective. Read more about dementia. Explore on-line resources like the Alzheimer's Association (www.Alz.org) or the Area Agency on Aging (www.LMTAAA.org). Take a caregiving class, get help from a geriatric or dementia consultant or attend a caregiver support group.

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