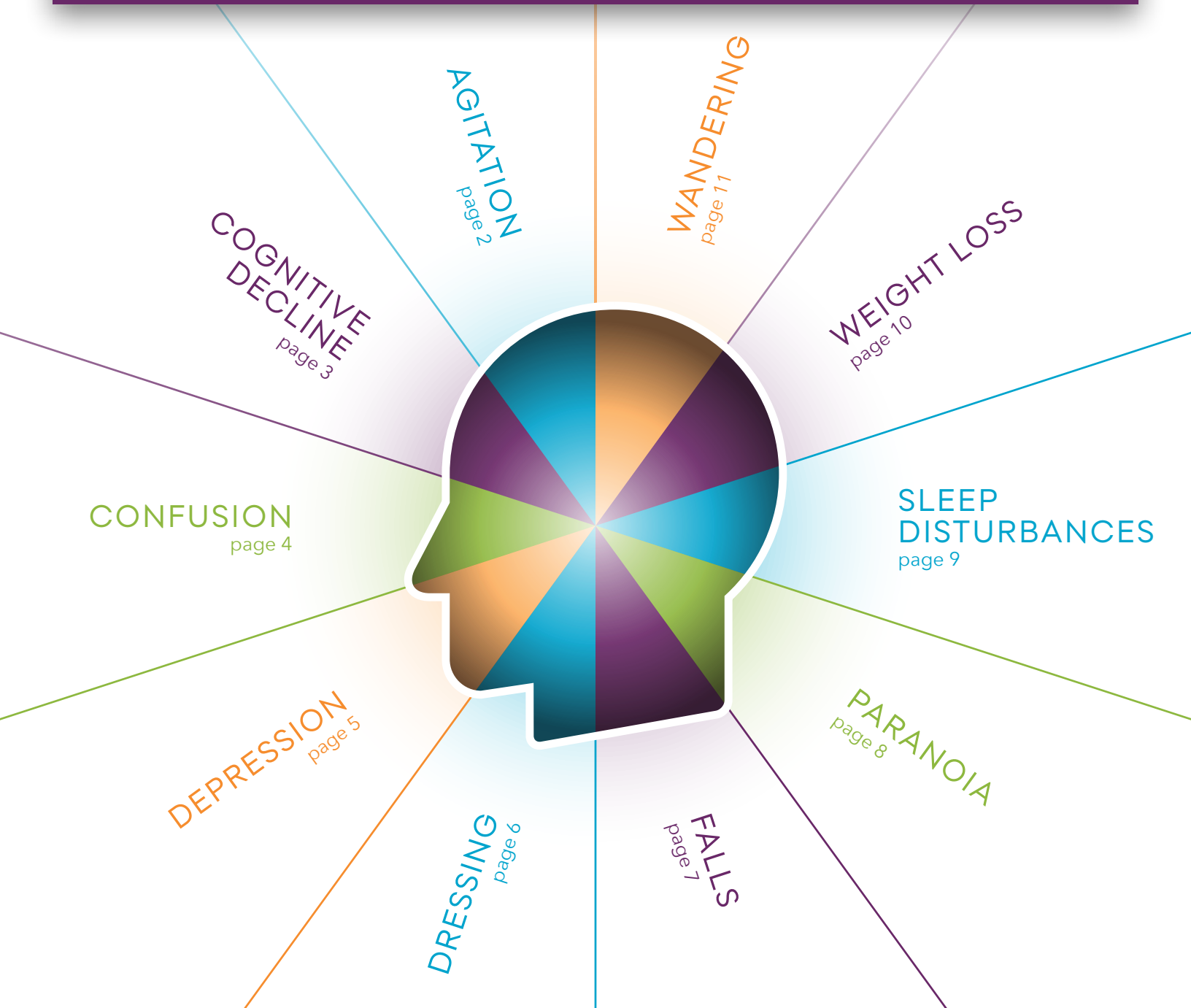


# A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR Managing Alzheimer's & Dementia Behaviors



# Practical Strategies For Daily Challenges

More than half a million people in Florida are living with Alzheimer's disease, the single most common cause of dementia. While most of these will be cared for by an adult child or spouse, few of those thrust into the caregiver's role have received any formal training on how to provide [dementia care in the home](#) or, for that matter, any setting whatsoever.

If this sounds like your predicament, this guide may be the solution. Using general guidelines for managing negative behaviors caused by memory impairment, we've compiled some [practical strategies used by dementia care experts](#) to manage the daily challenges that come with dementia caregiving.

## AGITATION

Agitation, one of the most common symptoms of dementia, is particularly noticeable as the day winds down. A time of day coined by healthcare professionals as "sundowning," late afternoon changes often cause people with dementia to become restless and agitated.

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**Feelings.** Do not underestimate the importance of feelings and human touch. Preserve your loved one's dignity by validating their feelings of frustration using a gentle tone of voice or understanding touch.

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**Activities.** Distracting or redirecting the person in your care to a different activity can alleviate agitation. Suggest a walk, new activity or favorite snack. Or, provide a comfy blanket and box of familiar objects such as family photos or collectibles. Helping to change the dementia person's perspective with an activity will diminish agitation.

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**Environment.** Creating a comfortable ambiance has been proven to play a role in alleviating symptoms of agitation in Alzheimer's disease. Reduce stimulation and minimize distractions in the room by turning off the television and playing soft, relaxing music.

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**Treatment.** Some research suggests that agitation can be treated with antidepressants. If continued agitation is severely interfering with your loved one's quality of life, ask your doctor for more information.



### Practical Support Tips

- Redirect or change subject
- Validate feelings and use gentle tone
- Learn triggers to avoid
- Play familiar music
- Reduce stimulation
- Offer favorite foods or collectibles
- Agree often/avoid arguments
- Take prescribed medications as ordered by physician
- Walk away and re-approach another time

# COGNITIVE DECLINE

According to the 2018 update to the American Academy of Neurology (AAN) Guidelines on Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI), there are no FDA-approved medications for the treatment of MCI. Instead, most medical interventions focus on physical exercise, nutrition and brain health.

**Physical Exercise.** Physical fitness and cognitive function have been consistently linked in research. Studies also show that exercise reduces agitation and promotes sleep. Start with a gentle exercise program that includes walking and gradually add activities such as dancing if they are well received.

**Brain Health.** New experiences, longer sleep cycles, music, reading and even video games and social networking have been found to have a positive impact on brain health and cognition. In recent years, research has been focused on ways to maintain and even regenerate new brain cells and neural connections. In memory care communities, brain training – or neurobic exercise – is often used as a technique to boost cognition.

**Legal Documents.** If and when cognitive decline progresses to dementia, it is important to get legal documents in order. Gather and organize documents such as insurance policies, birth and marriage certificates, deeds and mortgages, and a living will. It's also a good time to assign a durable power of attorney for healthcare (DPAHC).

**Memoirs.** Collecting and capturing memories in the early stages of cognitive decline will help you stay connected to your loved one. Explore popular online applications that help capture and preserve memories such as My Life Story and StoryCorps. Or, simply grab a video camera and make your own video.



## Practical Support Tips

- Write down worrisome behaviors to share with physician
- Seek a medical evaluation/clinical assessment
- Check for medication side-effects
- Increase physical activity
- Engage in brain exercises
- Organize legal documents and medical history
- Prepare a memory book/memoir



## Try these brain training exercises proven to sharpen the mind:

Start a new hobby  
Read aloud

Paint a picture  
Play a musical instrument

Plant flowers  
Do a crossword puzzle

# CONFUSION

Confusion is the natural result of memory loss. When a person with memory impairment cannot remember words to communicate or how to conduct activities that used to be accomplished with ease, it becomes a struggle to fill the gaps caused by forgetting ordinary tasks.

**Visual Clues.** Memory loss causes one to feel disoriented in the world, especially with regard to time and space. Use of visual aids such as clocks, watches or signs can help reorient the person and minimize confusion.

**Communication.** Modifying the way you communicate with the person in your care can alleviate or even prevent confusion. Avoid talking in long sentences or giving lengthy instructions, which are more difficult to understand for people with dementia. For greater success, only give one instruction at a time or break tasks down into small steps.

**Activities.** Replacing the confusion with functional activities like folding towels will provide a distraction and help a person with dementia reorient themselves in the moment. Avoid attempting later in the day any complicated tasks which are better suited for the morning, such as bathing and running errands.

**Routine.** Maintain a simple routine to reduce confusion caused by complex situations.



## Practical Support Tips

- Speak slowly
- Ask simple questions/ provide simple instruction
- Minimize choices
- Use visual clues such as calendars
- Break down activities into steps
- Look for nonverbal cues
- Maintain eye contact
- Minimize distractions such as TV



## Dementia-Friendly Activities:

Fold towels  
Take a walk

Visit a pet  
Set the table

Color or paint  
Sweep or clean

Jigsaw puzzles  
Organize a drawer

# DEPRESSION / MENTAL HEALTH

Alzheimer's disease interferes with neurotransmitters in the brain that impact mood. Depression is very common among people with dementia, particularly in the early and middle stages. It is important to make the doctor aware of any signs of depression so that proper treatment can be prescribed.

**Medical Evaluation.** Ask for a referral and make an appointment to see a geriatric psychiatrist who specializes in treating depression in older adults. In some cases, the doctor may prescribe therapy or an antidepressant to treat the symptoms of depression.

**Socialization.** Social isolation contributes to depression in people with dementia. To combat this risk factor, experts recommend introducing more socialization opportunities, such as scheduled outings. Taking your loved one to a favorite park or restaurant can provide a much-needed respite. Or simply ask a good friend to stop by for a visit.

**Tasks.** Cognitive disabilities associated with Alzheimer's cause confusion which can create feelings of failure and hopelessness. Plan more opportunities for the person with dementia to achieve something small every day such as setting the table to help boost self-esteem.



## Practical Support Tips

- Seek a medical evaluation and cognitive testing
- Make frequent visits and calls
- Encourage socializing
- Encourage exercising
- Explore new hobbies or revive new ones
- Arrange fun outings
- Open communications
- Offer reassurance and support
- Explore day stays at memory care community



## Common Symptoms of Depression:

Sadness

Agitation

Aggression

Apathy

Delusional fears

Withdrawal

Frequent crying

Disrupted sleep

Weight loss

Withdrawal

Fatigue

Aches & pains

# DRESSING

What once was an easy task can become a daily challenge for people living with Alzheimer's and dementia. People lose the ability to manage buttons, laces and zippers, so making smart clothing selections will ease frustration.

**Clothing.** People with dementia don't always complete tasks, such as getting dressed, in a natural sequence. In general, the fewer steps required to get dressed, the more independent the person in your care will be. Pull-on pants or trousers with elastic waists and tops - think sweat suits - are a practical choice for both men and women.

**Toileting.** Due to cognitive impairment, people with dementia cannot always react quickly to the sensation of needing to use the toilet. Specially designed clothing called adaptive wear can be purchased online and features easy fasteners such as Velcro® tabs to help prevent accidents.



## Practical Support Tips

- Remove unseasonable/seldom worn clothing
- Minimize clothing choices
- Select apparel with easy zippers and snaps
- Avoid apparel with buttons
- Select simple garments such as sweaters & pull-on pants
- Provide slip-on shoes



# FALLS

Safety is a common concern among caregivers, and for good reason. People with dementia are up to five times more likely to fall and become injured than those without memory impairment. Fortunately there are protective measures you can take to prevent falls before they happen.

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**Clear Walkways.** Move furniture against the wall and remove all clutter, including throw rugs, mats, and extension cords, to ensure all pathways in the home are free and clear.

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**Lighting.** Falls are less likely to happen in a well-lit home. Install lights in dark hallways and place nightlights at eye level to help your loved one navigate to the bathroom during the night.

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**Surfaces.** Hard wood floors can be slippery. Experts recommend use of rubber-soled shoes coupled with non-slip stair treads to prevent falls. Avoid waxing the floor and clean up spills right away.

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**Contrast.** High contrasting colors are simply easier to see. Experts suggest applying contrasting-colored tape and paint to serve as a visual guide. For example, black tape on the edge of a white tub enhances contour and is easy to see.

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**Adaptive Equipment.** Preventing falls in the bathroom is paramount. Install grab bars, purchase a bath chair or bench, and install a hand-help shower and raised toilet seat. All of these home improvements will not only make your home safer, but make your life easier, too.



## Practical Support Tips

- Provide nightlights (mounted high on the wall)
- Increase lighting
- Clear walkways and clutter
- Remove area rugs
- Install handrails and grab bars
- Install stair treads
- Provide rubber-soled shoes
- Provide chairs with armrests to assist with standing



# PARANOIA / HIDING

Dementia can exaggerate suspiciousness, which can result from memory loss. Rather than becoming defensive or upset, the best way to handle paranoia is to be patient and reassuring.

**Empathy.** Think about how you feel when you lose something important to you and reassure the person in your care. Tell them you are sorry the item was lost, but that you know how frustrating it is to lose something meaningful. If appropriate, offer a hug.

**Distract.** Agree with the person in distress, listen, and redirect their attention, but do not argue or attempt to reason with them into believing something different, as this only leads to more unwanted behavior.

**Hiding.** Paranoia may cause a person with dementia to hide items, but also forget the location of the hiding place. Store valuables such as wedding rings safely away and out of plain sight. Avoid clothing with pockets and identify favorite hiding places in order to locate missing items.



## Practical Support Tips

- Acknowledge feelings
- Avoid reasoning/arguing
- Avoid whispering
- Offer reassurance and understanding
- Offer to help solve the problem such as finding a missing item
- Minimize changes in environment



# SLEEP DISTURBANCES

People with dementia often get days and nights mixed up. Due to changes in the brain, the circadian rhythm is interrupted, and deep sleep, which the human body needs, is difficult to achieve.

**Daylight.** Exposure to natural light will assist with the body's natural rhythm to wake and sleep! Open the drapes and make sure the lights are on during the daytime to promote wakefulness.

**Routines.** Adhere to daily schedules, since these may contribute to promoting sleep. Serve meals and shower at the same time every day to help establish routines that may ease transitions.

**Stimulants.** Avoid or limit caffeine, a nervous system stimulant that interferes with the body's natural adenosine level and blocks the brain's normal sleep signals. Alcohol, a diuretic, also prevents REM sleep and leads to more bathroom trips.

**Flexibility.** Allow sleep where and whenever it happens - in a recliner, sofa or bed. Like food, it's important to [let people with dementia sleep](#) when they can and reset the body's internal clock.



## Practical Support Tips

- Avoid/limit stimulants like caffeine and alcohol
- Establish a routine for waking/bedtime
- Gentle reminders that it's time for sleep
- Permit sleep when and wherever it happens
- Offer a backrub for relaxation
- Use aroma therapy oils that aide in sleep



# WEIGHT LOSS

Swallowing is a learned reflex and people with memory impairment often “forget” how to swallow. People with dementia may be hungry, but often lose the ability to comprehend that hunger is the body’s way of signaling that one should eat.

**Aroma.** Memory challenges begin early in the disease, while the sensory memory of favorite foods will linger. Smells associated with familiar foods are known to trigger the brain, so serving food “family style” is a good way to stimulate appetite. Get out the bread machine or use a slow cooker and fill the home with appetizing aromas!

**Snacks.** Providing lots of snacks and easy access to fruit, crackers and vegetables can stave off weight loss. The goal is to maximize opportunities for your loved one to make the connection between food and eating by availing it frequently throughout the day.

**Vision.** Changes in vision can prevent people with dementia from perceiving food on a table, because it typically sits below eye level. Experts recommend use of high contrasting colors to draw attention to plated foods. Serving mashed potatoes on a blue plate or brightly colored Fiesta® dinnerware, for example, is a popular strategy.

**Plating.** The amount of food on a plate can be overwhelming for people with dementia. Finger foods and single-serve items can boost the desire to eat. Experts recommend serving food in a mug or on a piece of bread or tortilla to encourage eating while providing necessary nutrition.



## Practical Support Tips

- Offer smaller meals more frequently
- Plan meals with favorite foods
- Provide finger foods regularly & leave in plain sight
- Adjust temperature of foods
- Prepare foods with varying textures and color
- Serve foods in mugs to encourage independence



## Dementia-Friendly Foods:

Thinned oatmeal in a mug  
Scrambled eggs rolled in tortilla

Peanut butter on toast  
Chicken & vegetable kebob

# WANDERING

Wandering - or the urge to pace or walk around - is a natural and common behavior associated with Alzheimer's and dementia. Preventing wandering may actually increase negative behaviors such as agitation, so the key is to allow wandering in a safe and manageable way.

**Unmet Need.** Restlessness may be caused by an unmet need that the person with dementia is unable to identify or articulate. Offer food or beverage and a trip to the bathroom. Adjust the thermostat if it's cold or hot.

**Safety Products.** When wandering causes someone to become lost outside, particularly in the Florida heat, it can lead to a serious accident or even death. Allow safe wandering in the house, but prevent someone from venturing alone outside by using child-proof locks or doorknobs. At a minimum, install alarms that alert you when an exterior door is opened.

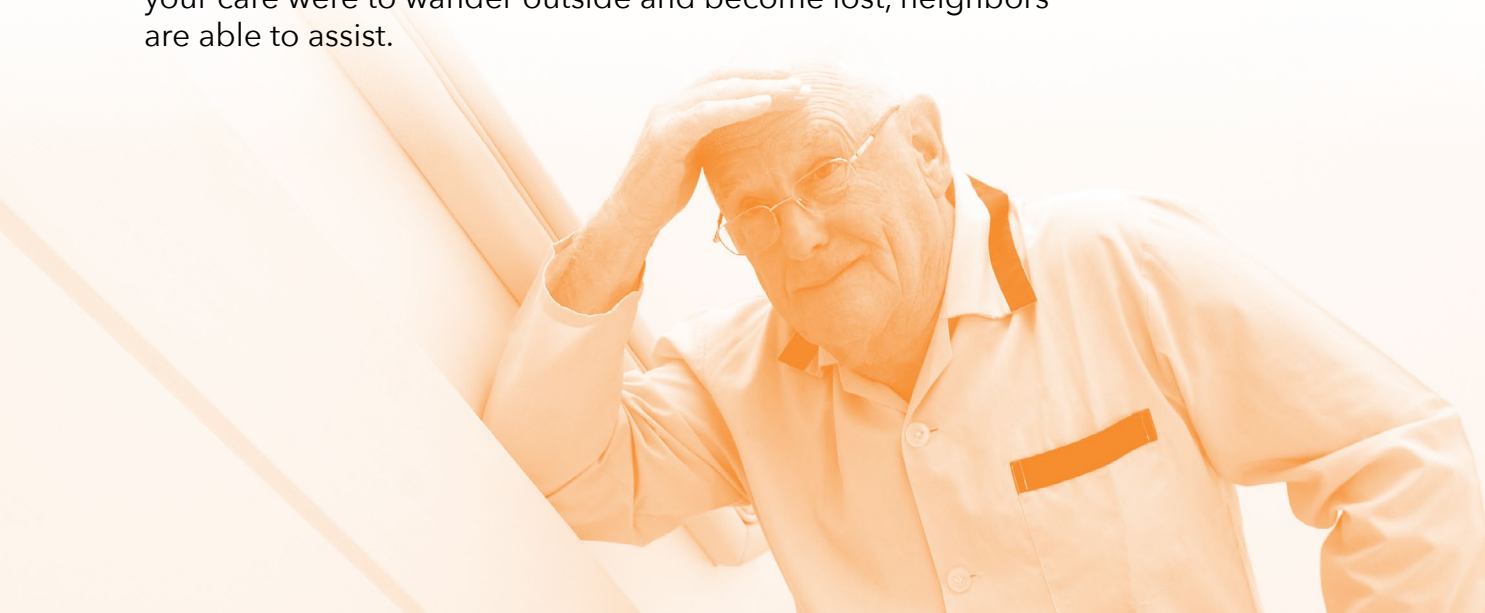
**Register.** Register with the Alzheimer's Association Safe Return<sup>®</sup> program at [www.medicalert.org/safereturn](http://www.medicalert.org/safereturn). The program includes a MedicAlert<sup>®</sup> ID bracelet or pendant, personalized wallet card, a personal health record, and 24-hour emergency response service, so that in the event your loved one were to become lost, a community support network consisting of law enforcement and medical professionals would be alerted to assist.

**Neighbors.** As a precaution, notify neighbors that you have someone living at home with dementia, so if the person in your care were to wander outside and become lost, neighbors are able to assist.



## Practical Support Tips

- Register with the Alzheimer's Association Safe Return<sup>®</sup> program
- Create an emergency kit with recent photo
- Install childproof doorknobs
- Keep lights on using amber lights bulbs for night wandering
- Use black doormats at external doors
- Inform neighbors of tendency to wander



# Get Help

Remember that dementia is a disease that causes damage to the brain. Brain impairment creates confusion which triggers a litany of other [behaviors that can be distressing](#) to both the person responsible for caregiving and the person in their care.

If you need help, do not wait until you are exhausted or sick. Build a support system early on to establish familiarity with other caregivers. Or, consider a day stay at a [memory care community](#) to give yourself a break from the demanding role of caregiving.

Alzheimer's is a progressive disease. It is important to recognize that your loved one may eventually require care beyond what you can provide on your own.



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