

# As the lights go down

## Dealing with memory loss

Memory loss is deeply saddening and stressful. Sometimes family and carers (often one and the same) feel like crying or screaming – so does the person living with a vast gap at the centre of their lives. “Belligerence often accompanies memory loss but what shocks loved ones almost as much, is their own growing lack of patience, understanding, or comprehension,” says geriatric social worker **Emily Carton**.

**T**here are many reasons why an elderly parent or relative with memory loss can become truculent. Some call it resistance, some describe it as pure defiance. In my experience neither description is fair or accurate. Almost always it is an attempt to retain some sense of authority over their lives. Most people, including us, cling to their independence.

In the early stages of memory loss, there is a great deal of denial on both sides. Your parent or aging relative does not want to accept what is happening and may not even be fully aware of his or her decline. For you, the adult caregiver, their memory loss and personality changes are probably bewildering and day-to-day issues can be exasperating and try your patience to the limit. Watching someone you love slip away is devastating. For the person who is losing his or her faculties, the experience is absolutely terrifying.

Both of you will feel an array of emotions that spread from grief, to anger, to guilt and rage. There is no simple three-step process you can follow that will change this. Each issue must be dealt with one at a time in a slow, calm fashion. Gently redirecting behaviour and establishing patterns so your parent or older relative feels, despite their losses, that he or she is still in control, is much more effective than confrontation. It is also very important to show that you understand and to validate you parent's feelings no matter what the issue.

For those who are in the early stages of memory loss it helps to keep calendars, clocks and reminders posted around the house. Order is essential. Keeping possessions simple and placing labels on things to indicate where they belong can be very helpful. A simple routine is also beneficial. It is important at this stage, as in all stages of memory loss to allow the older person to make as many decisions as possible. Let them choose what they will eat, what they will wear. You can narrow the choices down, but

make certain there are choices.

Simplify the world around them. Too much noise can be distracting as well as annoying. Too much clutter makes locating things more difficult. Pathways around the house need to be cleared of unnecessary papers and objects.

Diversion is a useful tactic when someone is resistant to help. When a parent is about to repeat a task that has already been done or repeat a story for the sixth time, gently change the subject to something of interest. Put on his or her favourite music, bring out old photographs, bring up a topic

that you know will recall happy memories. If the person becomes irritated, take a break and go back to the task when they are calmer – in half an hour or less they have generally forgotten they were annoyed.

As difficult as it can be, learn to ignore as much as you can. This is not easy but correcting someone whose memory is impaired makes the person feel humiliated and demeaned. *Also, it won't change the fact that they can't remember.*



In all aspects of life, you need to choose what issues are truly important and which you must ignore. Does it really matter if your parent's clothes don't match or the bed is not longer made correctly? Only life threatening situations or ones that may prove harmful need to be addressed.

**The following suggestions will help to minimize frustration and help you to communicate with someone with memory loss.**

- Use short, direct literal sentences.
- Put the most important information at the beginning of sentences.
- Avoid compound sentences i.e. two sentences joined with and, but, so, or, nor, yet.
- Use everyday words.
- Make direct statements and avoid open-ended questions e.g. don't say, "Is anyone hungry? Instead try: "I am hungry, why don't I make a sandwich for both of us?"
- Focus on the here and now. Try not to put them under pressure to remember something that happened that day, or the day or week before.
- Cueing is extremely important. Animate your sentences, point to objects that you are talking about.
- Don't argue. If the person doesn't understand you, reword your question. It may take several tries to find a way to make yourself understood.
- Focus on what they can do instead of saying, "You can't do that."
- Make certain to summarize what has been said. If you are going to make a sandwich, remind them that you just discussed lunch and tell them what you will be doing next.
- Allow time for the person to find the word or words they are searching for. If they need to say "a thing that takes you places" because they can't remember the word for car or taxi, don't correct them. Look for the meaning behind their words and try to make sense of disjointed comments.
- Touching is very important and very reassuring. Make sure it is gentle and loving and does not indicate any signs of restraint.

When someone is very impaired, it is important to continue to have conversations with them so they do not withdraw completely. Face the person you are speaking with and keep at eye level as much as possible. Use non-verbal cues often and keep your tone and demeanour

calm and reassuring. Remember, affection and gentle touching can calm someone down and alleviate frustration. They need to feel cared for and respected no matter how they are.


Try not to patronize or talk to the person as if they were a child. Tune in to *how* they say things, not necessarily *what* they are saying. This will give you an idea of how they are feeling inside. The decline in memory cognition does

not limit intelligence, only the ability to communicate.

Be aware that the person needs to feel respected and listened to no matter what is being said. While the frustration for the caregiver may be extreme, it is important to remember and see the person and treat the person with as much respect and dignity as possible.

When a person becomes agitated during a conversation, it may be a sign of fatigue. It's time to take a break, listen to music, and refocus on something that causes less anxiety and fatigue.

Communicating well under these circumstances is a skill that requires creativity, patience, and compassion. When it

becomes difficult for you, take a break, gather your reserves and resume when you can. Your frustration, as subtle as it may seem, is conveyed to the person who is also feeling frustrated and alone. 

Reprinted with permission of Self Help Magazine.

**As difficult as it can be, learn to ignore as much as you can. Correcting someone whose memory is impaired makes the person feel humiliated and demeaned.**