

How a Positive Environment Dramatically Affects Alzheimer's and dementia outcomes

January 30, 2014, Dementia, Jennifer Wegerer

Alzheimer's disease and dementia changes how older Australians interpret their environment. Names, places and people they know become unfamiliar, leading to disorientation, stress and isolation. But creating a positive environment, conducive to a person's comforts and needs, can help reinforce well-being.

It impairs not only memories, but reasoning and the ability to learn. In turn, as the Victorian Department of Health explains, Alzheimer's makes older Australians feel more anxiety and stress, become more sensitive to their physical and social environments, and rely more on their senses for cues about what is going on around them.

Essentially, if what older Australians with Alzheimer's or dementia see is familiar and routine, as opposed to chaotic and disorganised, they are more likely to enjoy life and feel like they belong.

Older Australians with Alzheimer's should live in an environment that provides comfort, routine and social opportunities. It should be familiar and offer meaningful activities that the person enjoys, not ones intended to just fill the time.

Most of all, the environment in an aged care facility or nursing home should feel like home. The longer a person can remain in the family home with in-home care support, the better.

Here are some ways for families to help older Australians with Alzheimer's live well.

- Make rooms easy to navigate.
- Have decorations incorporate soothing colours.
- Use photos and music to relax and lift the spirit.
- Make kitchen utensils easy to locate and meals easy to prepare. An in-home carer from a care company can help with shopping, cooking, companionship, playing games and using Alzheimer appropriate behavioural therapy.
- If you are using an in-home care company, don't allow them to swap carers. A constant stream of new people, often performing intimate tasks, is confusing, intimidating and downright frightening!
- Have the temperature suit the person's sensitivities.
- Have a phone near the person at all times. If a computer can be set up with SKYPE that would be very helpful.
- A computer, television, or in-home touch screen with a photo-show of family photographs helps enormously.
- Music is essential, especially music that the person loves. It can be set up on an iPod loop.
- Use simple décor to minimize distractions and tripping hazards. Remove throw rugs, and install grab bars in the bathroom if necessary.

- Keep visitors coming! Friends and family can help stimulate memories and laughs.
- Make sure outdoor areas are easily accessible, safe and purposeful.
- Look for distinct spaces, such as the kitchen, art and music therapy area, or a neighbouring library, a coffee shop, museum, that can help cue specific behaviours.
- Have carers provide a familiar routine. For instance, they should know how a person likes his or her coffee served and what time they like to wake up.
- Make sure that medical support is offered discretely.

Aged care facilities and nursing homes would do well to add this list of features to their residences.

Although it is not a cure, offering person-centred care and a positive environment can help lift older Australians with Alzheimer's and dementia.

If they can live in a positive, friendly environment, one that supports their health, independence and safety, older Australians with Alzheimer's or dementia will experience more personal control. They are more likely to feel secure, remain active and engage in activities familiar to them, which will help them live well for as long as possible.

(Sources: Alzheimer's Association, ATrain Education, and the Cleveland Clinic):