

Late Day Agitation: Sundowning

by Gert S. Pfohl

Director of Family Services Alzheimer's Association, Western NY Chapter

Persons with Alzheimer's disease or related dementia may experience increased agitation in the late afternoon or early evening. This is called "sundowning". Patients may exhibit a variety of behaviors such as becoming demanding, easily upset, suspicious of others and disoriented to their surroundings. While the cause of this change in behavior is unknown, experts suspect several factors may contribute to the behavior changes. Some simple adjustments by the caregiver may lessen the agitation.

As the day turns to evening, the person with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia may be affected by changes in lighting. Shadows and dim lighting may cause increased confusion. For example, tree branches waving in the breeze may be frightening. Good lighting and drawn draperies will reduce shadows and may make the person feel safer.

At the end of the day the person with Alzheimer's disease may be overtired and less able to cope with stress. This may be especially true if there is increased activity and noise in the home as dinner is prepared or other family members arrive home.

It is helpful to include your loved one in meal preparation by assigning simple tasks such as setting the table or peeling potatoes if he or she can do so without frustration. The family might also try to provide some quiet time by turning on their loved one's favorite music, allowing them to move with the music in a rocking chair.

A person with Alzheimer's disease or related dementia is sensitive to non-verbal communication. If the caregiver is fatigued and expresses this through tone of voice or impatience, their loved one may become anxious. A relaxed schedule of activities programmed throughout the day can reduce hectic evening hours and may absorb the memory-impaired person's extra energy without overwhelming him or her.

The family could also consider respite options. Attendance at an adult day program will provide the person with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia necessary socialization and much needed respite for the caregiver. When dealing with sundowning or other caregiver issues, it is important to remain flexible and to attempt different approaches and distractions while remaining considerate of the person's needs. It is important to provide reassurance and comfort and avoid arguing or asking for explanations. The person with Alzheimer's or a related

dementia is not doing these things on purpose but instead is dealing with the situation the best he or she can. Confusion and restlessness occur because the changes in the afflicted person's brain cause them to lose the ability to recognize what is familiar and sort out what is happening around them.