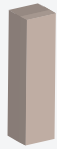


# DEMENTIA

Brain disease forces new reality — one families need to adjust to

BY AMY TRENT



If there's one thing Heather Pippen has learned during the past 14 years, it's that you don't bicker with someone who has dementia.

Dementia is a brain disease that makes it hard to remember things, communicate, focus, pay attention and even reason.

When that happens, families have to enter the dementia patient's new reality, or as Pippen, executive director of Heritage Green Assisted Living Communities, puts it, "meet them where they are."

"We want to encourage families to meet their loved ones where they are and not expect them to do more than they can. You have to get to know them where they are," Pippen said.

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Living with a husband's Alzheimer's disease. **Page 17**  
Carilion Clinic offers tips to improve memory. **Page 18**

Dementia can interfere with an individual's ability to complete everyday tasks, whether they are trying to make lunch or remember how to get home from a walk. Although there are many causes, Alzheimer's and vascular dementia are the two most common causes of dementia, which still has no cure or treatment to slow or stop its progression.

Heritage Green offers a memory care community called DayBreak for those with memory loss

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— Heather Pippen,  
executive director of

Heritage Green Assisted Living Communities



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION PHOTO/STAFF ILLUSTRATION

# Dementia

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caused by Alzheimer's and various kinds of dementia, and it's there that Pippen has watched families navigate those new realities.

Successful families are those that can communicate well, enabling the patient to understand what is happening and then successfully interpreting what a person with dementia is saying through their actions and behaviors.

Because individuals with dementia have trouble verbally communicating wants and needs, Pippen said it helps to really get to know the patient.

When approaching a person with dementia — no matter how close you are or how frequently you see one another — always introduce yourself, speak like an adult and make sure you are in clear view.

Families need to remove the pressure dementia patients feel to remember things like names and faces. Using baby talk is just a no-no, Pippen said.

Because dementia affects peripheral vision, patients may be able to hear you but not see you coming from the side.

Talk about only one thing at a time, give lots of cues and reminders and be patient in waiting for an answer. Dementia makes it difficult to follow a conversation that strays and slows, but it does not prevent the thinking process.

"Understand that their brain has gone through physical changes," Pippen said. "There are physical issues here."

Check on your posture tone of voice and remember when verbal comprehension deteriorates, patients with dementia use nonverbal clues to interpret what is happening. A patient

may not know what "hurry up" means but does know something is wrong when someone puts their hands on their hips and raises their voice.

If mom asks to talk to her deceased mother, Pippen said, don't try to explain the mother is gone but understand she needs to talk about her.

"You have to validate them where they are," Pippen said. That means telling her you miss your grandmother, starting a conversation or letting her reminisce about her mother.

"A lot of times, it's just meeting an emotional need they have," Pippen said.

As far as learning how to listen to a dementia patient who no longer can verbalize their needs, Pippen said it pays to be attuned to their environment, which can play a big factor in behavior. When a patient gets aggressive, pushes family away or starts cursing when they never did before, they are trying to tell you something.

Pippen uses the example of the patient who takes their clothes off in public. The ac-

tion could be a behavioral issue or their way of telling you they are too hot.

"Out of character behaviors are signs of frustration," Pippen said, and families have to re-evaluate their approach and expectations of the person.

"You have to be a good detective and find out why they are doing it."

Taking the time to make it a successful visit has lasting effects, Pippen said. If a visit has not gone smoothly, patients can forget the disagreement, but the anger it caused will stay with them for the rest of their day.

The same applies when families elicit happy emotions in those with dementia.

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*Check on posture, tone of voice and remember when verbal comprehension deteriorates, patients with dementia use nonverbal clues to interpret what's happening.*



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