



How to Avoid Challenging Situations with **Your Loved** **One Living with** **Dementia**



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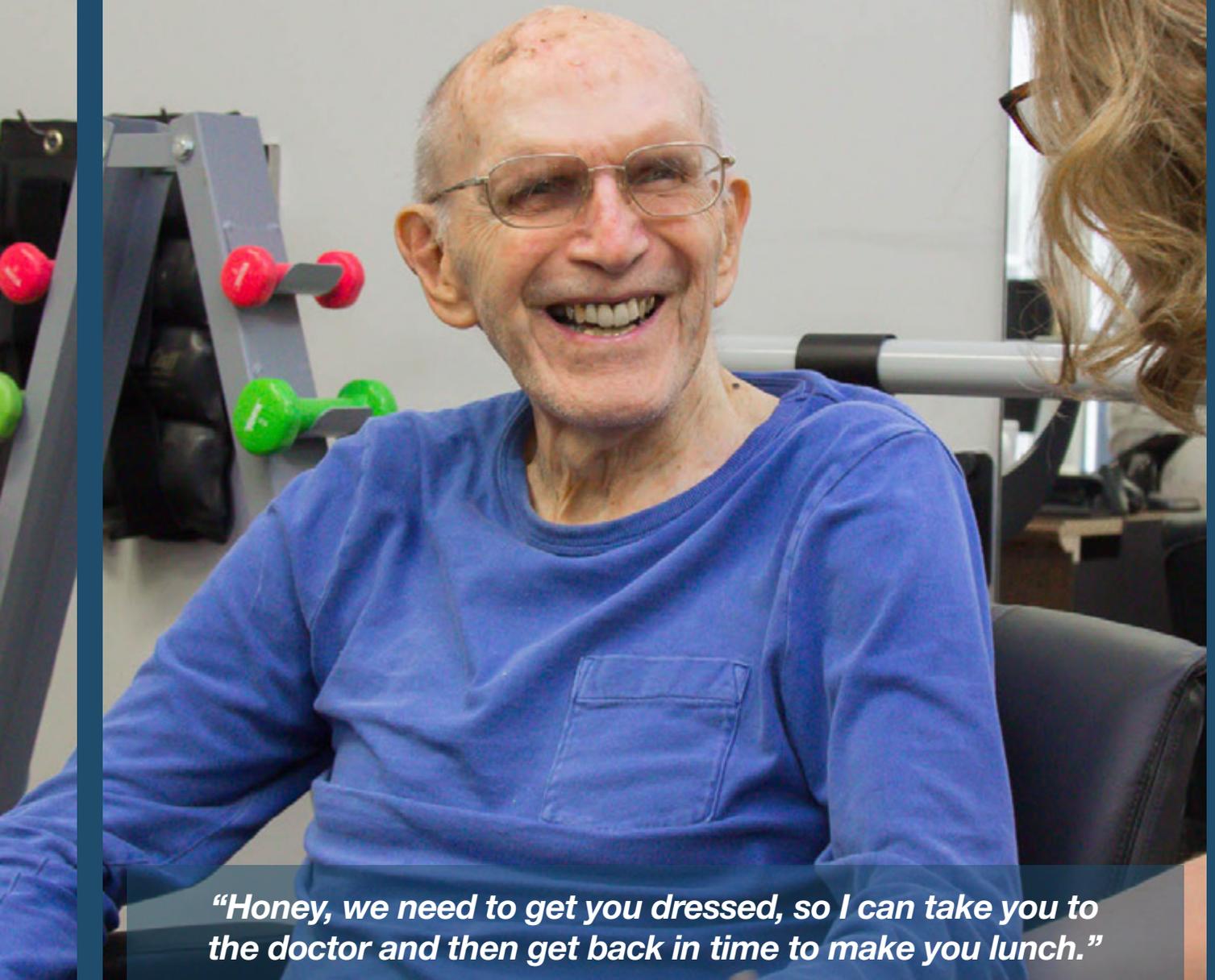
INTRODUCTION

When caring for someone living with Dementia, you may begin to notice [personality changes](#) and mood swings. One of the most challenging situations while caring for a loved one with dementia is learning how to relate when memory falters and behaviors change. For most of your life, for better or worse, you know how your loved one would respond to most situations. You knew how to appeal to the likes of your spouse or parent and you knew to

avoid arguments related to [topics that were sensitive](#). Now, topics that used to be non-controversial have become a cauldron of emotional responses. Often, we aren't aware of what triggers these reactions until you are facing them head-on. It can be challenging and exhausting trying to navigate a new normal, but here are 5 key actions you can do to improve communication with your loved one and avoid behavioral outbursts.



1. Recognize When You Are Spending Too Much Time on the Physical Task of Caregiving



“Honey, we need to get you dressed, so I can take you to the doctor and then get back in time to make you lunch.”

Does this sound familiar? Too often the family of a person living with dementia sees their role as caregiver first, and their role as a loved one or a spouse second. When this happens, the person receiving care picks up on this change long before the family caregiver notices, and will begin pushing back. Even though they may need cues to help throughout the day, the last thing you want to do is to let the person you are caring for feel that they are something that needs to be checked off of a list.



2. Develop Good Communication Strategies for Someone with Dementia

Learning how to relate to your loved one before asking them to complete a task is essential to engaging in quality communication. Oftentimes, we don't request one individual task, but instead begin rattling off a series of things that need to be done. "We need to get up, get dressed, grab some breakfast, and head to Cindy's house." You've just provided four HUGE tasks in one sentence. Rattling off a list of action items that cover half of a day often increases anxiety in your loved one. For someone

living with dementia, memory loss and lower brain function makes it difficult for them to put the steps of a task in the right sequence and/or remember what to do next. Your loved one will, however, remember the emotional tone that is conveyed in what is asked of them. If the tone is heavy, they will sense this. A disapproving tone may lead them to become frustrated or withdraw, both of which can cause difficult behaviors to escalate.

When caring for someone living with dementia, it is helpful for you to take the time to simply begin any day and task with a helpful, and loving interaction. The person living with dementia can sense your positive tone and will have a greater likelihood of feeling good about the activity and the day. Your loved one is always living in the moment! If they can feel good about the moment, it is easier for them to move into the unknown with your trusted guidance. This also allows you to enter into their world, walking alongside them as a guide, rather than just being a taskmaster.



How many times have you entered a room and began talking to your loved one, but your eyes never met or you never touched and never truly connected with them before you started talking? For someone even in the early stages of dementia, this can be extremely confusing. Due to losses in their visual field and spatial perception, as well as challenges in understanding and interpreting language and speech, talking to them without a visual connection may not make sense to them.

A simple thing to learn in communicating with someone living with dementia is to see how

many words or sentences they do understand, see if incorporating visual cues improves their understanding in your discussion. For example, instead of just asking “Do you want to wear a yellow shirt or a red shirt?” you also hold up and show each option as you inquire. As their dementia advances, your loved one will be able to process less fully, so you will begin to only use words and phrases with visual cues. Additionally, incorporating positive touch into the request helps them feel good about the choice and how you are helping them. For more Alzheimer’s & dementia educational tips [click here](#).

FUN FACT

Did you know if you are talking with someone living with dementia, they are most likely to understand you if you are: facing them and standing slightly to the side, within range for them to hear and see you?



3. Understand Why A Life Story Is Important

How we have always known a person may not always be how the person living with dementia sees themselves. Their most recent memories of themselves have faded. Knowing a person's life story, especially pastimes and memories associated with their childhood and adolescent years, can be extremely helpful in communicating and connecting with your loved one.

As a caregiver, your life has been caught up with attending to all of the medical and physical needs of your loved one, that often the ability to plan a few hours to do something enjoyable is forgotten. This does not mean that this has to be something that involves a lot of family or fanfare, but could be something as simple as a ride through the country. The key to doing something enjoyable means finding those past times that your loved one enjoys and can still engage in.

MEET SALLY

Sally was her mother's long-distance caregiver. When she came to town to see her mother, she had the day lined up with medical appointments, beauty salon trips, and grocery shopping. Often, she fought with her mother, as keeping her mom on a schedule of this long day was something that her mom just didn't understand. When asking the daughter "what is your mother's favorite past times?", she had to think deeply as it had been a while since they had engaged in anything fun. She remembered that her mom loved southern diners and riding in the car to look at old cemeteries and churches. The daughter was encouraged on her next visit to resist the urge to schedule the day fully and instead take her mom on a drive and to a quiet diner.

The daughter was concerned that these two outings would only take two hours. Since she only visited once every three weeks, what would she do with the rest of her time? The daughter was reminded that what mattered was that

her mother enjoyed her favorite past times. Her role as the daughter was shifting from caregiver to best friend. "But then what should I do the next day?" She asked.

"The same thing! She will enjoy it again."

After her visit, the daughter called to report about what had transpired. On the first day, her mother, who usually did not recognize her, and fought with her on the visit, said, "I like you, will you come again?" The daughter was overjoyed, but could not imagine that the next day her mother would enjoy the same activities. The second day, they went on another drive and out to eat, and as she dropped her mother back off at the facility, her mom gave her a big hug and said, "I love you."

It does not matter if favorite past times are repeated, what matters is spending quality time together in activities that are meaningful and cherished.

4. Learn When and How to Allow Your Loved One to Be in Charge of a Conversation



If you are working with your loved one, you need to let them feel like they are in charge. This is key to maintaining their sense of self-worth and independence. The best way to do this is to enter their world, where they are in charge and you are there to guide them with prompts and cues.

Not all of our loved ones are take-charge individuals, some have been nurturers or caretakers themselves and respond best to, “I need your help” or “Can you help

me?” The best way to understand what motivates your loved one to engage with you is to practice this technique to improve communication. You may have some roadblocks; the key is to creatively interact to keep your loved one engaged on their terms. Eventually, you are able to recast situations that could lead to challenging emotional or behavioral outbursts, and you have the potential to learn something new about your loved one and the things they value.

MEET JIM

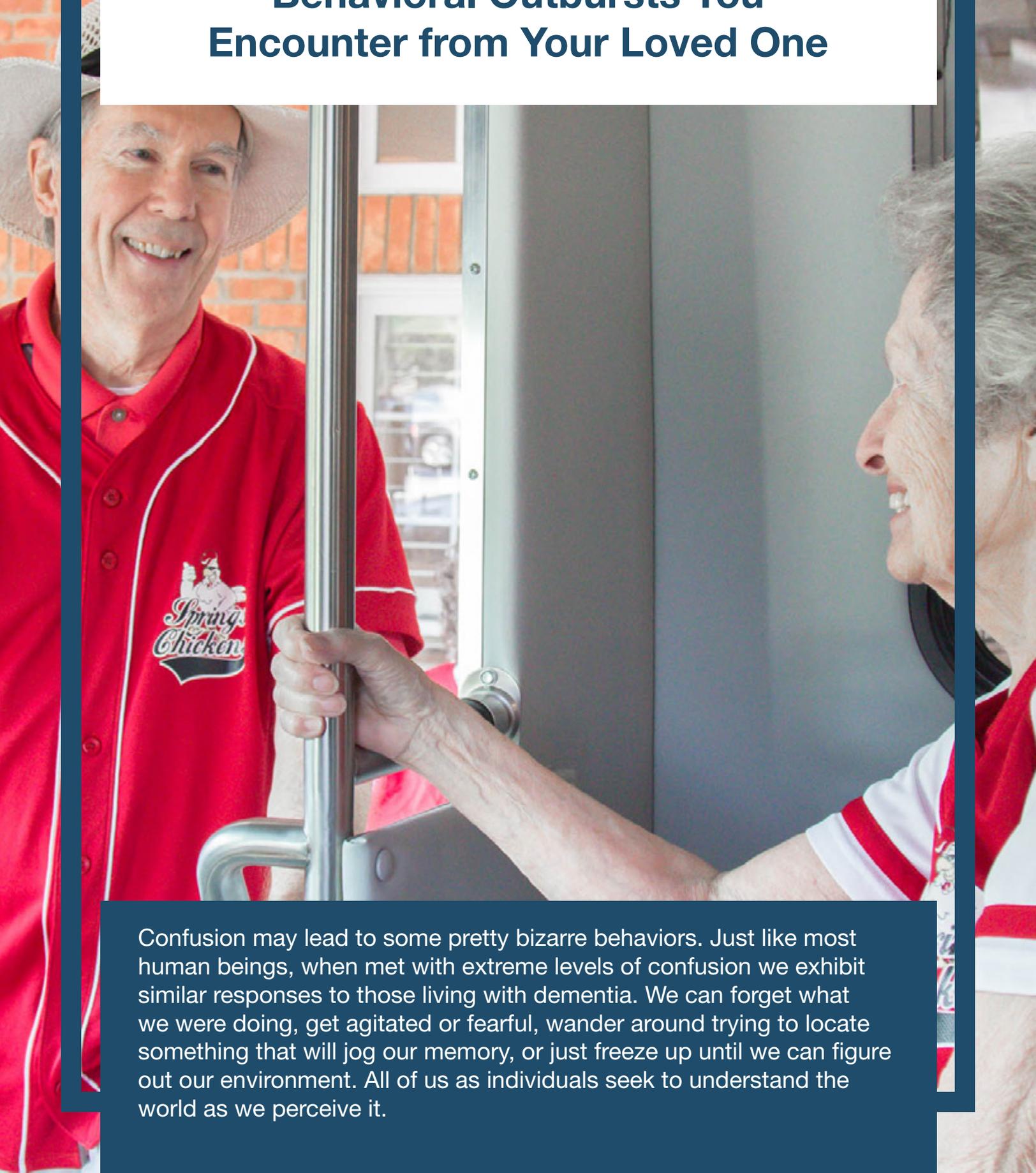
I was once called in to consult with a family and community where a lovely gentleman was fighting with his caregivers and family. They had moved Jim from his home in Florida to a Senior Living community, and all he wanted to do was to pay someone to “break him out of this joint”. Sound familiar? Jim had physically hit several well-meaning caregivers and was consistently being lectured by his family. Of course, Jim promised not to do it again, but the problem continued to persist.

In learning Jim’s life story, I was impressed that he had been in charge for most of his life and was used to calling the shots and taking chances. He loved conversation and, having been a journalist for many years, loved to spin a story. Since his onset of dementia, his speech was lower in volume, and

he often forgot the words at the end of a sentence. Understanding that he could only process two sentences at a time was essential when having a conversation with him.

When you gave Jim good cues and questions that related to his life story, he began to blossom when conversed with, and it allowed him to feel in control and comfortable in situations. He would talk about preparing for a work visit, and the caregivers would take notes on what things needed to be completed before the visit was to occur. Many times, he would forget the need to get ready for his “work trip,” but he still enjoyed spending time sharing about the things he valued and bonded with his caregivers and family as he participated in the conversation.

5. Find Out Emotionally What Is Underneath Some of the Behavioral Outbursts You Encounter from Your Loved One



Confusion may lead to some pretty bizarre behaviors. Just like most human beings, when met with extreme levels of confusion we exhibit similar responses to those living with dementia. We can forget what we were doing, get agitated or fearful, wander around trying to locate something that will jog our memory, or just freeze up until we can figure out our environment. All of us as individuals seek to understand the world as we perceive it.



The key thing to remember is that behavior is an expression of need.

If we focus on remembering this and seek to find the root cause of a behavior, we are better able to communicate and understand our loved ones to guide them through their daily lives. Frustration, agitation, and combativeness are most often responses to external or internal issues. When a loved one is frustrated, they may not know what to do next or feel bombarded with instructions that are not helping them. Their emotional responses

are heightened, and their ability to control their frustration or fear has decreased due to the brain failure caused by dementia.

The good news is that even with advancing dementia, the brain does not fail completely. Often, if an individual with dementia is allowed some space and given proper cues or a better environment, many extreme behavioral or emotional outbursts can be avoided.



Learning How to Structure A Day That Flows Well for You and Your Loved One

For a love one living with dementia, time has no meaning to them and sequential thinking does not exist. Your loved one can literally walk into a room and not know where they are and why they are there. With this in mind, it is important to realize how important a functional, reliable schedule for a day can help your loved one go from one activity to the next seamlessly. Ultimately, it can make the entire day more manageable for them and their caregivers





One woman living with dementia shared how difficult it was for her to find her way around her new senior living building. She felt embarrassed and nervous, but she loved that she had friends who helped her throughout the day to get her from one thing to the next. She said it took a lot of her anxiety away and helped her stay on task.


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Finding out whether your loved one is an early morning person, whether they like to wake up slowly, or if they want their favorite cup of coffee in the morning can help begin the day on a high note. Next, you can arrange necessary tasks intermixed with things that your loved one enjoys.

The journey of the day is just as remarkable as the task. Taking time to share a compliment on how well they are dressed or letting them dress themselves rather than you fussing over them can make them feel good about themselves and the day. Your job is to be their assistant and focus on caring about them rather than just caring for them.



Creating a template for the day that includes times of engagement, relaxation, and enjoyable activities that follows a leisurely pace will decrease unwanted behaviors. If you notice your loved one becoming more frustrated or anxious at the end of the day, you can try increasing the amount of light they are exposed to in the middle of the day, and slowly decreasing these levels as it nears the end of the day. Also, incorporating relaxing music during times when agitation occurs can help. The key to success is to build meaningful engagement and joy into the day. By doing this, you begin to recast your relationship from caregiver to best friend and care partner.




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If you would like expert care for your loved one at The Springs we offer an extensive memory care program and would be delighted to help. Please contact us for more information.