

Partners in Care with Maureen McCarthy-Magill, LSW on Real Roots Radio

Sundowning

April 15, 2021

It is not uncommon for people living with dementia to have changes in their behavior in the late afternoon into the evening. This is commonly known as Sundowning.

Question #1 What is sundowning?

Sundowning generally means that an individual with dementia shows signs of agitation, restlessness, or confusion toward the end of the day and into the early evening when the sun goes down. Approximately 20% of persons with Alzheimer's experience some form of sundowning. Sundowning isn't entirely understood, but it does have to do with changes in the brain due to the dementia. It's thought that sundowning could be triggered by fatigue at the end of the day; we all get tired as the day progresses – but if we are struggling with cognitive challenges on top of regular physical and mental exhaustion, well that's a lot to handle.

Question #2 What would a caregiver do if they notice that their loved one is showing signs of sundowning?

When caregivers notice a marked change in the person they are caring for late in the day there are a number of things they can do. Basically, they need to do a little detective work if this is a repeated behavior so that they can figure out how to make things better. They can start by:

1. Keep a log noting what time the behavior usually starts and what has happened just before it started so that they can figure what might need to be changed to deter this from happening in the future.
2. Try to think about the what the person living with dementia did at this time of day when they were younger, working, in retirement. Knowing what their past schedule was like might give insight into what the person living with dementia is trying to do currently. So, if they got home from work at 5 pm each night, did they eat right away or go out for a walk, or watch tv. If there was something specific, try to enable that to happen now and see if it helps ease anxiety.
3. Caregivers might monitor themselves to see if the caregiver is sending a non-verbal message to the person living with dementia that the caregiver is tired or frustrated with the person living with dementia. Some people living with dementia are very good at picking up on the feelings of others through non-verbal cues, but they may not know how to respond to that information except through actions resulting in anxiety or agitation.

Therefore, it might be good for the caregiver to try to rest sometime during the day, so they are in a better frame of mind at the time that their loved one starts sundowning.

4. Plan an enjoyable activity that the person living with dementia can be engaged in at this time of day. Invite them to go for a walk or sit in a rocking chair – the rocking motion might help with any pent-up energy.
5. Offer soothing music to help reduce anxiety. Avoid tea, coffee, or other stimulants at afternoon lunch.
6. Try controlling the atmosphere – such as turning the lights on as it starts to get dark outside and close the blinds so that the person living with dementia is less aware of the changes outdoors. This is especially important if the person living with dementia is having sleep issues because caregiver wouldn't want their loved one going to bed too early and then be getting up for the day at 2 or 4 in the morning. Darkness can contribute to already present vision problems and cause a person living with dementia to be anxious about what they think they are seeing in dim rooms with shadows.
7. Even though some sundowning might be related to fatigue, it is important to keep the person living with dementia on a schedule regarding sleep, if possible. If naps seem necessary, try to have them take their nap in the late morning, and for only 20-30 minutes rather than in the afternoon which can throw a person's internal clock off and interfere with sleeping through the night.
8. Caregivers can help their loved one who demonstrates signs of sundowning by reassuring them that everything is alright, and by trying new things in order to figure out how best to make this time of day a little easier for everyone involved.