

## Alzheimer's

**My friend's grandma has Alzheimer's. She said it's one of the worst things that has ever happened in her life. She went to visit her grandma this past weekend and she didn't remember her at all. I have never had to deal with this sort of thing before. What can I say to help her out?**

Alzheimer's Disease is a sad reality among many older people. It affects the parts of the brain that control thought, memory, and language. Every day scientists learn more, but right now the causes of Alzheimer's are still unknown, and there is no cure. I know how this can affect a family and those who love the individual because my wife's dad has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's too. It's been very hard. A person may often remember the distant past more clearly than yesterday's events. They are often happy to talk about their memories. But remember, past memories may be painful too. There are times when he'll talk about the days when he was still on the farm and tries to get us to help get the cows in for milking. It's been years since he's been on a farm. My wife's dad didn't even know who she was the last few times she went to visit him. As painful as that is, it's just as sad to see his lack of independence and competence as it is to know he's forgotten some of the memories that we hold so dear, or who we are.

There are a few things to keep in mind that you may want to share with your friend. One thing to tell her is that she doesn't have to try to convince her grandma of reality. This is a new part of her life, and it's important to remember that they probably feel vulnerable and are in need of reassurance and support. It is important that those around them do everything they can to help retain their sense of identity and their feelings of self worth. They should always be treated with respect and dignity. Even though they have a disease, they are still a unique and valuable human being.

The key is to not take it personal. Some times they can even get mean, but this doesn't mean that those feelings are what's really going on inside. Being there is still important. Just because they've lost some of their mental capabilities, doesn't mean they don't need friends, family and meaningful relationships. When we visit my father-in-law, we try to talk about things that may be familiar to him; singing old songs or hymns, sharing the Lords prayer, talking about the weather, gardening, or other things. Often, memories of these things come back.

### **Some other things to keep in mind**

- It's OK to answer the same questions over and over again.
- Treat the person as an adult and with courtesy and respect, however advanced their disease may be.
- Never talk across them or over their heads as if they were not there.
- Look for meaning behind the words even if, on the surface, they do not seem to make much sense.

All of us are on this side of eternity and will face different challenges. But God is still there even when bad things happen. He can help your friend through this, along with others in her life. It's important for her to talk about the grieving cycle that's taking place, and to talk about her feelings. And remind her that it is also OK to laugh sometimes, and to not feel guilty about it. It seems funny that my father-in-law, who once seemed to hold an unspoken disdain towards me for stealing his little girl away from him, now rather likes me! We will sometimes laugh at the thought that my father-in-law had to lose his mind to like me.

Most importantly, encourage your friend to continue loving and caring for her grandma even when it doesn't seem like she can love her back. Despite her sometimes strange behavior or declining mental capabilities, her grandma's loving soul remains intact.

Articles are written by Bob Lenz, Tiffany Thompson and other national youth communicators with Life Promotions Inc., a non-profit youth organization committed to instilling hope, worth and value in youth.

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