

Creating an 'Alzheimer's-friendly' home for your loved one

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Oversized digital clocks that show the day and date can be helpful for people with Alzheimer's. Image source: <http://free-alzheimers-support.com/wordpress/>

(PhysOrg.com) -- Susan Coppola, an associate professor of occupational therapy at the UNC School of Medicine, explains how making simple changes at home can help an Alzheimer's patient stay healthier, happier and more independent.

For family and friends, learning that a loved one has Alzheimer's disease can be devastating. As the disease damages and kills nerve cells in the brain, patients gradually lose their memories and the ability to control bodily functions. Science has yet to find a cure.

But by making a patient's home more "Alzheimer's-friendly," caregivers can make everyday living safer and easier as the disease progresses, said

Susan Coppola, an associate professor in the Department of Allied Health Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine. Improving the person's environment can help him or her remain at home longer, stay socially engaged and retain skills, Coppola said.

More than 170,000 North Carolinians have Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia, according to the North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services.

Most receive care from family and friends. Nearly 11 million Americans provide unpaid care to people with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

As a caregiver, you can help your loved one remain independent longer by establishing routines soon after the diagnosis, Coppola said. Begin by helping the person get his or her finances in order.

Next, determine habits and schedules: Where will keys be kept? When will doors get locked at night? Sometimes a written list can enable the person to complete morning and bedtime tasks independently

You can also help the person set up a calendar and a reminder system. A timer may help the person remember to do important tasks, such as turning off the stove during meal preparation. And think about tools, such as nametags, that will help him or her remember names.

As the disease progresses, the person's environment will need change, too. You may need to take steps to prevent the person from wandering from home. Consider a security system or obtain an identification bracelet for the person. You'll also need to remove safety hazards, such as dangerous medication, from your loved one's reach.

But while you should eliminate dangerous objects, leave behind enough things that the person still has something to do, Coppola cautioned.

When caregivers take away loved ones' belongings or prevent them from participating in routine activities, the patients can spend hours with nothing to do.

"The deprivation creates emotional stress," Coppola said.

Instead, try involving the person in activities, such as tidying a room or cooking. Rather than organizing a shelf yourself, work on it with your loved one. Tell the person you appreciate his or her help and remind the person of your love.

You can also prevent boredom by providing interesting objects, such as magazines, photographs, sporting equipment or craft materials. Or try creating an area where your loved one can rummage around, such as work bench, art station or a miniature putting green in the garage.

Many people suffering from [Alzheimer's disease](#) cannot tune out distracting elements of the environment, leaving them bombarded by sights and sounds. You can help the person by sharpening your attention to your five senses: Is the TV blaring? Is there a glare from a sunny window? Are there any strong smells? Removing those distractions can help your loved one feel calm and safe.

Above all, don't forget to take care of your own physical and emotional well-being, Coppola said. That means getting plenty of rest, taking breaks from caregiving and obtaining help from others in your social network and the healthcare community.

"A caregiver who is happy and rested is a better caregiver," she said.

More information: Alzheimer's Association www.alz.org/

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine

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