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“Back to School” for Seniors – caring for your loved one with memory loss

Many middle-aged people are finding themselves struggling to take care of both their aging parents and younger children. In the early 1990s, Carol Abaya termed these adults the “Sandwich Generation,” a reference to being “sandwiched” in between two groups who both need care and attention.

If you are already in this situation, you know how hard it is to be constantly caring for a parent and raising a family—factor in a full time job and you certainly have more to do than a 24-hour day allows. Know you are not alone: according to the Pew Research Center, more than one in every eight Americans between ages 40 and 60 are caring for their children as well as at least one aging parent.

Seniors with Alzheimer’s disease or another form of dementia can be particularly difficult to care for. How can you find relief? Consider the benefits of an adult daycare center. It is no secret that we send our children to school to learn, socialize, and exercise. Older adults need this too, and adult daycare centers can provide socialization with other seniors and a variety of cognitively stimulating activities to engage your loved one while you are working or taking a break from caregiving. These centers are significantly cheaper than nursing home facilities, and have the added benefit of keeping your loved one at home, a comfort no amenities at a nursing home can replicate.

If you don’t need to leave your loved one at an adult daycare center all day, there are many organizations in the St. Louis area that offer just the mental and physical activities for one to two hours a week. Have your loved one try a Memory Drumming class offered by the Alzheimer’s Association, or a mall-walking group for seniors, so you can take those couple hours a week off for yourself.

Most importantly, these resources give you the opportunity to relax a little. Take a day off work while the kids are at school and mom is at the adult day center. Do some shopping or catch up with an old friend. Plan a picnic for the weekend that everyone will enjoy. Coach your son’s little league team while grandpa is at his evening exercise group.

Remember, caring for a loved one is stressful. Making your life a little easier and reducing your stress levels just slightly will translate into your attitude toward caregiving.

About Memory Care Home Solutions

Memory Care Home Solutions is a non-profit organization that exists to extend and improve quality time at home for families caring for loved ones with memory loss, dementia, or Alzheimer’s disease. Our professionals train families regarding safety of the living environment, provide strategies for addressing difficult behaviors, and offer suggestions for maintaining appropriate levels of independence in your loved one, all with the ultimate goal of reducing caregiver stress. We come to you; no diagnosis is necessary for our consultation; and our services are made available regardless of ability to pay. To ensure families continue to benefit after our initial consultation, we schedule follow-up phone conferences throughout the year, and our professionals are always available to discuss concerns family caregivers may have. Founded in 2002, and later funded with a generous grant from the Missouri Foundation for Health, Memory Care Home Solutions fills a critical in-home support and training void for caregivers. Washington University in St. Louis collaborates with the organization to evaluate outcome success. For more information, please contact Erin Kelley at (314) 645-6247, via email ekelley@memorycarehs.org or visit www.memorycarehs.org.

Staying Sharp with Dementia or Memory Loss:

Q: What are some activities/resources in St. Louis for people with dementia that can stimulate and occupy my loved one for a couple hours each week?

A: If your loved one is starting to show the early signs of dementia such as mild memory loss, there are many programs in the area that can help. It is important to keep in mind these considerations: do you want a program located at a community center or would you rather keep your loved one at home? Do you want a program that meets on a regular basis or one that you can utilize whenever you feel it is necessary for your loved one? What is your budget for a therapy or programs? Do you want a program focusing more on cognitive stimulation or on support and coping?

Here are a few programs offered by local St. Louis organizations for seniors throughout the fall and winter:

The Brain Fitness Gym: The Brain Fitness Gym began working with seniors in 2006, both in the home and at local centers in St. Louis. The gym offers a collection of computer programs seniors can use to exercise memory, response time, spatial and visual perception, and hand-eye coordination. The Brain Fitness Gym offers weekly group sessions at the center, as well as private coaching at the center or at home. Prices and Packages are available on their website:

<http://www.thebrainfitnessgym.com/>

The Memory Practice: Started in 2006 by a psychology research scientist, The Memory Practice seeks to provide seniors with fun and stimulating brain exercises in the comfort of their own homes. The Memory Practice mails enrolled seniors two packets of brain exercises each month, to be completed between one and two weeks at each individual's own pace. The Memory Practice is a very customized programs, ensuring appropriate difficulty of and satisfaction with its product by phoning clients twice a month to see how they are doing on their packets. Pricing and program options are available on their website: <http://www.thememorypractice.com/>

Memory Drumming: Sponsored and operated by the St. Louis chapter of the Alzheimer's Association, Memory Drumming is led by a certified music therapist and meets every month for one hour. The program costs \$5 for each lesson, or you can buy a 6-lesson punch card for \$25, making this the most affordable and financially flexible program. Memory Drumming is a drop-in program, and requires no prior musical experience. Call (314) 432-3422 for more information.

The cheapest option, however, might be simply to play word/number games from local newspapers or to engage your loved one in mild physical activity. Some word games such as crossword puzzles may become a little too difficult for someone with dementia. In this case, try switching to seek-and-finds. Make sure font size is large enough for your loved one to read. Regular exercise offers not only physical benefits (i.e. more regular sleeping patterns, reduced risk of cardiovascular complications, improved motor skills resulting in fewer falls), but has also been shown to improve memory and mood. It is important to choose exercises your loved one can handle and to start off easy if he/she isn't used to the exercise. Swimming, walking, and jogging are good physical activities. However, they may require a particular amount of supervision on your part as a caregiver, and you might simply not have enough time. If this is the case, some other mild physical activities that require less supervision include stretching, gardening (make sure seniors stay hydrated, though) and mall-walking with a local group of seniors.

Q: How do I tell my loved one that it is no longer safe or appropriate for him/her to do things he/she has done for many years—drive, cook, walk the dog, manage finances?

A: There is no easy way to tell someone that he should no longer do something he's been doing for years. But you certainly don't want to see your loved one get hurt or cause irreparable damage because he/she is not capable of driving or cooking, despite what he/she thinks. One successful tactic is to approach the discussion with the consultation of a third party. This can be anyone from a family attorney, family physician, or a program director who can give an expert opinion your loved one will be more inclined to respect. *Our staff regularly acts as this third party professional opinion as well.* Identifying a third party to advise a particular decision reduces the likelihood of your loved one becoming defensive, even though you are simply exhibiting great concern as a loving family member.

Remember, different activities warrant different approaches. Sometimes you should be firm and consistent in not allowing your loved one to do something; for instance, driving is not something you should allow on "good" days and not allow on "bad" days. Other activities should be approached as ones to wean your loved one off of; cooking is a good example of this—if someone shouldn't cook on an open flame anymore, allow him/her to help in other ways in the kitchen such as stirring, baking or serving.

the Difference Between Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease?

Dementia

a collection of symptoms that affect daily intellectual and social functioning, caused by deterioration in the brain:

- memory loss
- problems with abstract thinking
- disorientation in regard to time and place
- difficulty performing familiar tasks
 - problems with language
 - loss of initiative

Alzheimer's disease

the most common cause of dementia, in which healthy brain tissue degenerates; other causes of dementia include:

- Parkinson's disease
- Lewy body dementia
- Frontotemporal dementia
- Vascular dementia

Thus, dementia is the broader term that describes the symptoms caused by Alzheimer's disease, the more specific medical illness.