

AGING / MOVE OF THE MONTH

Remember What We Can Learn from the Forgetful

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AgeSong Senior Communities

I recently talked with Judy Huston, a minister who lives in Orinda and whose brother Doug is a resident at our AgeSong Lakeside community in Oakland. Although Doug is still in his 60s, he suffers from dementia, brought on by a series of strokes. The journey that Judy and her family have been on with Doug is one of simultaneous loss and discovery, grief and joy, and an ultimate recognition of what valuable lessons about life and spiritually can be learned from people with forgetfulness.

Right now there are nearly 5.3 million people in the United States with Alzheimer's and dementia. Fear surrounds this condition, even though it is not a disease, but simply another state of consciousness. Many professionals in the industry view it as "forgetfulness" and seek to discover what wisdom those on this journey can impart to us and what we can learn from them.

Over the past 15 years, I have had

hundreds of discussions with families of AgeSong residents about the value of forgetfulness. As a Zen teacher, I help families practice mindfulness and learn how to be "in the moment" with loved ones who live with dementia. Wisdom is not about memory; it is about being present. That is one of the most important things that families and friends can remember, especially at this time of year, as graduations, weddings and summer barbecues bring all generations of families together.

Here are some tips for families for supporting parents or grandparents with Alzheimer's at family gatherings and celebrations in a meaningful way.

Don't dwell on "remember this" and "remember that." Those with dementia have a single point of focus; instead, talk about the here and now – the food, flowers, weather, people.

Be accepting. Alzheimer's is not contagious. Learn to accept this difference in your loved one. It is a way to learn how to deal with your own changes in life.

Set a good example. Model good behavior and inclusive gestures for your children or grandchildren; they will notice and follow your lead.

Music, art and dance can play a positive role in bringing joy and physical transformation to those with dementia. They feel better, and there is a sense of meaning to what they are doing. For those whose spoken language is no longer their primary communication tool, art and music can be important venues to express their thoughts and feelings. Consider incorporating some expressive arts activities into family events that everyone can enjoy.

Above all, when you are with a person who has Alzheimer's or dementia, you are with a whole person - one who has physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs. Focus on those elements, and you will find that supporting your loved one will bring joy to all of you.

Tips for Healthy Aging

- Enjoy a warm bath or shower every day.
- Tending to plants and seeing them flourish, can bring a sense of achievement and joy.
- Regular physical activity strengthens the body's natural immune system.
- Frequent, balanced and nutritious meals including fresh, organic foods, especially fruits and vegetables, are important.
- Maintain balance in your life by doing things that have meaning and purpose for you. Build relationships, explore the arts, and develop new sides of yourself.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
(L-R) Orinda's Doug Dary, who utilizes AgeSong's services, his sister Judy Huston, and AgeSong's Nader Shabahangi.

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