



CONNECTING MINDS

DEMENTIA CARE NEWSLETTER

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Bathing Clients with Alzheimer Disease and Related Dementia

While some clients look forward to having a bath, others offer a real challenge. They simply don't want to be bathed and will do whatever they can to prevent or delay it. Bathing a client with some level of harmony requires an understanding of their objections or obstructive behaviour. An attempt at bathing may be seen by some as a personal assault or an invasion of personal space, a feeling which may be driven by modesty. A caregiver must have a relationship that allows the undressing and bathing of a client and must understand the need to focus primarily on the client being bathed rather than the process of bathing.

The unpleasant feelings that some clients experience while being bathed may be heightened by a declining mental condition. An unfamiliar caregiver may be seen as invasive, threatening, and with certain physical impairments, someone causing pain. When a non-preferred bathing method is used, the client is likely to be further stressed. Finding solutions to bathing problems can be challenging. Some caregivers have a knack for bathing people without difficulty while others routinely experience problems. Some fundamental things can consistently lead to success and some must be tailor-made to the client. Successful caregivers have mastered the fundamentals and have a clear understanding of how to handle people under stress.

The fundamentals for success are in establishing a relationship with the client and in ensuring the bathing area is warm, private and as comfortable as possible. A personalized bathing plan should be developed to address particular preferences and concerns of the client as an individual. The caregiver must deal foremost with the person and then to the bathing process. Being able to avoid stressing a client can be challenging, but essential to the current and future bathing sessions. Patterns of behaviour are likely to be repeated with each bathing session unless a key can be found to deal with them effectively. The best time of day to bathe a particular client, a preferred bathing method, an analysis of who is the best person to bathe this person and how best to deal with certain patterns of behaviour in a particular client should all be documented and fully understood by the caregiver giving the bath.

An understanding gained by focussing first on the person, then on the task of bathing will pay dividends in future. Watch for feelings of pain or discomfort, fear and agitation and deal with them immediately. Preserve the client's dignity, privacy and comfort. Encourage participation in the bathing process to curb disruptive behaviour. Engage in conversation about their family and other interests, anything that keeps their mind occupied. Develop a relationship with them that facilitates the process. Allow the client to hold security objects if it will reduce agitation.

Be flexible, use persuasion and be prepared to shorten or put off the bath if necessary to avoid extreme stress. Using force or coercion to complete a bath will likely provide for a worsened situation next time. Let the client feel in control when there is an opportunity and give the client choices. Use rewards, comforters or distracters to make bathing more pleasant.

Goals in bathing should be for the caregiver to:

1. Ensure the client finds the bath pleasant and relaxing.
2. Have the client participate in the bathing process.
3. Reduce or eliminate problem behaviour.
4. Provide a good level of hygiene.

TIPS

- Try to make the experience pleasant by using bubble bath or playing soft music
- Bathe when the person is in a good mood
- Consider scheduling the bath in the morning or in the evening when the person is already getting dressed or undressed
- Prepare the items for bathing ahead of time while keeping the area uncluttered
- Use a brightly coloured mat in the bottom of the bath so the person can determine the depth of the water more easily
- Make sure that the water isn't too deep
- Instead of trying to convince a person that it is time for a bath, help with the first step (e.g. Let's take off your watch now.)
- Allowing a person to keep a towel in front of the body may help to ease anxiety for those who are self-conscious about nakedness
- Make sure that the water heater is turned down to prevent scalding
- To prevent a chill or discomfort from cold, cover with a flannel or bath sheet
- Make sure the bathroom is extra warm and that the tub is well lit
- Try using a hand-held showerhead, introducing it each time by spraying water on the tub and then on the hands
- Use soaps that have a distinctive colour and can be held easily
- If hair washing is a problem, try shampoos that do not require water
- Remain with the person who is bathing to ensure that he/she is safe

EVENTS & EDUCATION

**26th International Conference of
Alzheimer Disease International
26–29 March 2011
Sheraton Centre Toronto Hotel**

**For more information—
www.adi2011.org**

A Personal Story

Mary just will not take a bath

A few years ago this true story was narrated by a staff member in a LTC home. This is the story of a tiny elderly lady named Mary who just did not want to take a bath. Staff reported that she was very resistive to bathing and described her as being physically abusive and aggressive at bath time.

Mary was diagnosed with probable Alzheimer's disease about 4 years before entering into LTC. She had spent most of her life on a pig farm until she had to move in with her daughter and then later to LTC. She weighed 85 pounds soaking wet, walked independently around the secured unit and for the most part was pleasant until it came to her bath. Staff and residents heard words and saw the fighter come out in Mary every Tuesday and Saturday night. The care team had run out of ideas. Staff had been injured and subsequently Mary had not had a bath in over a month. What to do? The staff asked her daughter to give Mary her bath and she agreed. When the daughter was given a tour of the state of the art spa, the answer came to her right away. You see there is this wonderful chair lift that the resident sits in to be elevated and then lowered into the tub. Mary only had to look at the machine going up and memories of slaughtered pigs being put on the hook upside down came flooding back to her and feared that this is what would happen to her. The trigger! This was Mary's reality. Now Mary is given a shower with no difficulties at all.



RESOURCES

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