

*Let's Talk Care*  
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*Adjusting to Sensory Loss*

Caregivers and family members have the power to help elderly people make an easier adjustment to certain losses that occur in old age, for example, loss of vision, hearing and sensitivity to hot and cold temperatures. Here's how.

*Vision*

As we get older, the lens of our eye hardens, making it difficult to see things clearly up close or at a distance. Eyeglasses with bifocal lenses help correct this problem... provided they're within reach when needed. Who hasn't heard (or sung) the familiar refrain, "Now where did I put my glasses?" We nominate eyeglasses for the "most misplaced object" award. Be creative in helping your family member keep track of eyeglasses: attach them to an attractive neck chain, label them, find a special place for them in a wheelchair caddy. Most important, encourage your family member to wear them.

Aging also causes the pupil of the eye to grow smaller so that people need more light just to see objects or people as before. Peripheral vision declines, making it more difficult to "see out of the corner of your eye." And glare, such as from sun on snow or a flashbulb, can actually be painful.

Families can help just by being aware. Driving with the sun in your eyes, adjusting to a dimly lit restaurant, glancing at a blindingly bright used car lot at night -- anyone would squint under these conditions. Aging eyes, however, feel this way a lot. When you're with your family member, avoid dark rooms. Turn on more lights. Give the seat facing away from the window to the resident. Make sunglasses available.

*Hearing*

Loss of hearing can be traumatic. It isolates people from their world. Families can help by making every effort to understand the type and extent of hearing loss. For example, some elderly people with hearing loss easily converse, but can't hear a call bell or telephone. Once you know what you're dealing with, you will know how to proceed. You may need to stand in front of the resident in a good light, and speak slowly and clearly (but do avoid shouting -- it startles, as well as raises the pitch of your voice thereby making it harder to understand what you're saying).

If a hearing device would be effective for your family member's particular type of hearing loss (this isn't always so), encourage its use... and help with its upkeep. Turn it off before removing it from a person's ear, don't drop it, don't get it wet, keep it clean, and make sure the batteries are charged.

Hearing loss changes with time. Watch for warning signs, such as uncharacteristic

disinterest in conversation, requests for the volume to be turned up on the TV, etc.

As with most things, sensitivity is the key. You might try placing your hands tightly over your ears. Then have a conversation with someone.

### *Temperature*

Elderly people may not be able to distinguish as well between hot and cold temperatures. They also don't always feel pain or discomfort -- a situation that can lead to injuries. If you are helping your family member bathe, test the water temperature first. You might even set your hot water tank thermostat to above 45 degrees C. Reddening skin is the first sign of a scald.

If you have any questions about how to help a resident with sensory loss, please talk to the director of care or registered nurse at the nursing home.