

The Argument Trap

You're visiting your mother at the long-term care home. She has Alzheimer's disease, which has affected her short-term memory and judgment. You help her with dinner; tonight she has an appetite, and polishes off her plate. But five minutes after leaving the dining room, she tells you she is hungry – when is dinner? Gently, you remind her that she has just eaten. "I have not," she replies. "I'm hungry. I want my dinner." You describe the meal to your mother. "Remember the zucchini – your favourite – and telling me how good it was?" She does not remember. You tell her again that she can't possibly be hungry. She pushes past you, agitated and angry. You feel upset, too. In spite of your best efforts, you cannot convince your mother that her hunger pangs are fantasy.

It's a familiar scenario, and a frustrating one for caregivers and residents alike, in spite of the fact that arguing with someone who has a dementia makes as much sense as sending a chicken to the dentist. Here are three strategies for sidestepping this common trap.

Abandon logic. Alzheimer's disease is about everything *but* logic. Logic relies on a thought process that links facts together like cars on a train, as in a "train of thought." Alzheimer's disease strips people of that linking process. They can deal with only one fact at a time, or one car at a time. The 10 cars that passed along the train tracks before it, simply don't exist. When we're compelled to prove that they *do* exist, we doom ourselves and our loved ones to unnecessary stress and bad feelings.

Think for a moment about just how much of our day-to-day conversation is shaped on the assumption that everyone knows what has gone before....or even that there was a yesterday. People with Alzheimer's disease know nothing of the kind; indeed, may be equally convinced it is not so. What can possibly be gained by arguing?

Step into the resident's reality. Leave *your* reality at the door. When you're communicating with people who have Alzheimer's disease, live with these people in their here and now – wherever or whatever that may be. If your mother, in spite of her full stomach, insists that she's hungry, accept what she tells you. Offer her a glass of juice, a slice of bread or some vegetable sticks. If she wants to dust her room, having dusted it no more than 20 minutes ago, pick up another duster and get dusting. Go with it. Cast off *your* reality; it is no longer relevant to this relationship, and can even cause pain.

And by the way, stepping wholeheartedly (and respectfully) into the resident's reality can offer its own rewards to you, the caregiver. The shared meal, the song, the memory fragment, the smile, the embrace: for the resident, these are gifts whose life span lasts but a moment. Appreciating small pleasures for the colour and intensity they lend to this single moment can be an enriching response to life.

Go behind. Look behind words to find their true meaning. Don't argue with your father when he tells you over and over that he wants to go home. Instead, say: "You must miss your house and your life on Barrymore Street, Dad. It was a beautiful home, and you put so much of yourself into it. Let's pull out the photo album."

Talk to your director of care for more ideas on avoiding the argument trap.