

Restoring Life for Alzheimer's families

By Didina Burok (2003)

If I could claim to have found the cure or cause of the Alzheimer's disease, I'd be rich and famous. I'm neither. I do, however, have a story that shows it is possible to restore a good part of life for an Alzheimer's patient and their family.

As of now, it is neither known what causes Alzheimer nor how to treat it. Medicine has only been able to slow down the progress of the disease. In addition to some medications, mental stimulation can be a factor in slowing down the progress of Alzheimer's. Since Alzheimer's usually strikes the elderly, it is often difficult to find ways to stimulate them. Some patients have physical disabilities preventing them from participating in outings. Others live with family members who take over the running of the household and are so focused on the day-to-day tasks that they have little time to stimulate the Alzheimer's patient.

Taking care of Alzheimer's patients can be very stressful. They are no longer the person their family used to know. They seem to be someone else, taken over by the disease. Often the family (and especially the spouse) is in denial, believing that the disease will eventually reach a point when the patient will snap out of it. It does not happen. In fact, the more the family member insists that things are not the way the Alzheimer patient sees them, the worse things get. This causes stress both for the patient and for the family member.

I run a company that places high-quality caregivers in the home of the elderly to help them live in their own home for as long as possible. During the early to mid-stage of Alzheimer's, most patients can live very comfortably in their own home, provided of course, that they are not left alone. Often they live with spouses, adult children, or grandchildren. Spouses are likely to be elderly themselves. Adult children and grandchildren are likely to have jobs and be out of the house for periods of time. We found that by getting outside help for even a few hours a day can provide a respite for the spouse or for the family caregiver, while at the same time providing the stimulation that the Alzheimer patient requires.

One such case in point: Tina and Frank have been married for over 50 years. A couple of years ago, when Tina was diagnosed with Alzheimer, she no longer recognized Frank as her husband, nor was she aware that she lived in the United States. The more Frank tried to convince her of her whereabouts and who he was, the more Tina became withdrawn, depressed, and confused. When the situation got bad enough, Tina was sent to an adult day

care every other day. Things worked out fine in the beginning. However, Tina was having difficulty understanding those around her (English being her second language), and became confused about the days she was to go and those that she was not going. Before long she refused to go altogether. She started sleeping later and later, not wanting to get up or get dressed. Eventually, her daughter sought help. She came to Care4You, a company that provides caregivers in the home of the elderly. We found Pat, a wonderful caregiver who now goes to Tina's home on a regular schedule, for a few hours a day. Tina looks forward to having company daily. Because Pat is a new face and has no associations in Tina's memory from the past, it was easy to convince Tina that Pat is her friend. She thoroughly enjoys Pat's visits. Now Frank has an opportunity to take a few hours off each day. The caregiver, whose sunny disposition is making a difference, involves Tina in activities such as painting, cooking, walking, or shopping. At least for a few hours a day, Tina is occupied and forgets about her problems. Frank gets a respite, and they get a home meal prepared daily. Their daughter no longer has to stop by on a daily basis to make sure mom took the medications or that they have something to eat.

Tina's Alzheimer's disease will take its course. However, for the last 3 months, she has had more good days than bad. She still does not recognize Frank, she still thinks she's in another country, and she still has days when she finds it hard to get up. For the most part, however, she looks forward to the caregiver's visit and immerses herself in whatever activity is planned for her for the day. This is a classic win-win situation. Tina is getting some stimulation in a familiar environment and on a consistent, daily, basis. Frank and their daughter are getting a break. They eat better, they have less stress, and the caregiver loves her job because she knows she's making a huge difference in someone's life.

The above is a true story.

Care4You, that's what we do!