

alzheimer's association®

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The Battle of the Bathing

By Luciana Cramer, Care Specialist

Bathing. Just the thought of it makes caregivers cringe. The arguing, the crying, and the seemingly inevitable battle with potentially catastrophic results, bringing an otherwise peaceful day to an end.

Personal hygiene is important. Caregivers realize that bathing must be a component of care, and failure to bathe may increase risk of rashes, skin diseases, urinary tract infections, and other harmful or unpleasant conditions, not forgetting body odor. Caregivers understand the need. They feel the urgency and they are resolute: *bathing must be done.*

Alzheimer's patients, however, may see things differently. Starting at stage 5 of dementia, the logistics of bathing – with its rituals, schedule, order, gadgets and steps – become somehow complex. What used to be a pleasant time dedicated to grooming and self care slowly turn into an annoying chore, and people start neglecting it. At stage 6, bathing is not only difficult, but the reason for bathing becomes utterly elusive. *I don't need to bathe, I feel fine.*

In addition to being unable to understand the need for bathing, people find it uncomfortable: bathroom is cold, water hitting on skin is scary, being disrobed feels vulnerable and embarrassing, running water sounds loud and there is a fear of falling. Some dementia patients may also have brain damage resulting in confusion between hot and cold temperature or in different sensation on contact with water. Bathing may at this point feel just like a senseless torture.

And so the battle begins, the resolute caregiver versus the unbending patient:

Caregiver, determined: *It's time to shower.*

Patient, not moving: *I've showered already.*



Caregiver, frustrated: *No you didn't. You haven't showered in two days.*

Patient, not moving: *I am fine. I don't need a shower.*

Caregiver, exasperated: *Yes you do, you smell bad.*

Patient, not moving, offended and angry: *YOU smell bad. Leave me alone.*

Similar confrontations happen every day in homes where patients with dementia live: caregivers' dutiful determination in accomplishing an obligatory task crashing against dementia patient's unshakable indifference to it.

Caregivers need to be reminded of the 1st golden rule of dementia care: do not reason. Not because your loved one does not want to understand your motives, but because dementia makes reasoning impossible. This is part of their disability.

Instead of trying to convince them that bathing is necessary, caregivers must first address the reasons why bathing has become so objectionable. Is bathing complicated, scary, uncomfortable, embarrassing or unpleasant? What can be done to make it less so, and more tolerable, while still safe for both patient and caregiver?

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Tips

Give the person choices.

Ask: "Would you like to take a bath or a shower?" or "Do you prefer to bathe now or in 15 minutes?"

Fill the tub with 2 to 3 inches of water.

Then assess the person's reaction to getting in. It may be better to fill the tub after the person is seated.

Be sure the person has a role.

Have the person hold a washcloth or shampoo bottle.

Be aware that the person may perceive bathing to be threatening.

Have activities ready in case the person becomes agitated. For example, play soothing music or sing together. If the person resists bathing, distract him or her and try again later.

Always protect the person's dignity and privacy.

Try to help the person feel less vulnerable by covering the person with a bath blanket while undressing.

Have a familiar person of the same sex help, if possible.

Cover or remove the mirrors if a reflection leads the person to believe there's a stranger in the room.

Be flexible. If necessary, allow the person to get into the tub or shower with clothes on. He or she may want to undress once clothes are wet.

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Start with preparing the bath room. Remove locks from bathroom door. Make sure electric dryers and razors are out of reach. Install grab bars and a hand-held spray attachment to shower head. Use non-slip bath mat on the floor outside the tub. Remove clutter. Consider a padded shower chair. Make sure room is well lit and warm. Lay out soap, washcloth, towel and clean clothes in sequence. Consider a towel warmer. Use less water in tub, adjust water temperature to the person's comfort. Use curtains and robes to enhance privacy. Play soft music on the background.

Bath is prepared, now it is time to invite the person.

Evaluate the best time of day for bathing. Consider old habits and time of day when person is most relaxed. Try not to get too anxious when a person refuses a bath. Wait and try again later. Try bathing instructions on a prescription pad. Try offering a couple of choices: *do you want a bath or a shower?* Simplify the task as much of possible. Take your time. Do not rush. Gently guide the person through each step. Use simple cues and respectful language. Let them touch the water before getting in. Provide a wash towel to hold while bathing. Provide encouragement saying things like the *water feels so nice* or *this feels good*. Make sure they are covered and warm when drying. Offer a reward, such as a favorite food or a ride in the car. Compliment the person on how good they look and how nice they smell. Give praise.

If bathing continues to be difficult, don't bathe every day. Do a partial sponge bath on the days between bathing. Separate hair washing from bathing — hair washing can be done with the spray attachment, or in a sink or in a beauty shop. Try dry shampoo. Try using a bath chart or calendar to help keep track of bathing schedule. Some in-home care agencies can provide professional caregivers who are skilled in bathing dementia patients, and your loved one may be less resistant with a professional.

If a person is absolutely refusing to bathe and



the lack of hygiene is intolerable, consult the doctor. There are medications that can be used to address resistance to care.

Personal hygiene is a private matter. Although a person with dementia clearly needs help, having another person telling you what to do or staying in the bathroom with you feels like an intrusion. Be sensitive to how they are feeling and provide a warm, encouraging and respectful environment. Bathing does not have to be a battle, but it takes time, understanding and respect.



Tools:

Alzstore.com — Offering a variety of products to assist with bathing activities, including an anti-scalding device, modesty bath cape, rinse-free shampoo and wipes.

Alzheimer's Association 800-272-3900 — Care specialists are available 24/7 to help you evaluate your individual needs and formulate a plan of action with strategies to address your unique concerns.

Alzheimer's Dementia Hands-On Care DVD: "The Art of Caregiving" with Care Expert Teepa Snow, providing valuable strategies on how to effectively communicate with dementia patients and deliver care.