

I want to go home!

As dementia progresses there is growing confusion. For many, confusion grows throughout the day with added fatigue from trying to navigate a world that has become more difficult to understand. For many people living with dementia, it is common that the person no longer recognizes familiar places – even one's home of many years. The person begins to ask their family member to take them home. This catches family members off guard – after all, the person has been living in this same home for many years (if not decades). Our logical selves usually try many unsuccessful strategies. We take the affected person from room to room in hopes that the home will become more familiar. We show them pictures and beloved treasures that we think might snap them back to reality. We try to explain that this is their home, and they must stay. However, most of these strategies don't work or may only periodically work. Subsequently, the requests to "go home" continue well into the evening.

So, what does "I want to go home" really mean? Think about it from the perspective of the person living with dementia who is confused. Nothing looks or feels familiar. The day is growing late and there is a need to be and feel at home. The family caregiver might not even look familiar to the affected person which adds to the confusion.

When we "listen" to the voice and body language of what the person is really saying, we will hear a different message. These might include:

- I don't know where I am.
- I am frightened!
- I need to get home and fix dinner for (the kids, my husband, etc.)
- Why are you keeping me here?

It is essential to really understand what the person is telling you and acknowledge the emotion underlying the request to go home. Generally, the person is becoming anxious, worried, fearful and/upset. Your message of telling the person he is home will only add to growing upset, anger and perhaps trying to leave the home.

Here are some steps you can take in this situation:

- Acknowledge their emotion and request. "I can see you are worried and want to go home."
- Let them know you are sorry and will take care of the situation. "I'm sorry you are worried. I am going to take care of you until you get home."
- Try to defer the request to go home. "It's late right now and I can't get you home. I'd love for you to stay with me for dinner. We can figure out how we will get you home (no you won't! - but it let's the person know you care.)
- Get the person busy doing something that can take their mind off the need to go home. "I think our favorite show is on right now. Come watch it with me!"
- Have a familiar family member call your loved one who knows how to respond with empathy. For example, a daughter calls her mom and says, "Hi mom, I know you want to go home. I need you to stay with that nice man until I can get you in the morning."

- Some caregivers find success taking the person out for a drive. After riding around for 30 minutes (or less) the caregiver announces, "I'm tired. Let's head home." Many caregivers report that their loved one follows them into the house.
- Ask members of your support group for ideas that have worked for them to manage this request.

What you don't want to do is make a trip back to the person's birth home. Many caregivers think that if they take their loved one back to the childhood home, the request to return home will go away. What almost every caregiver who has tried this method finds is that the person sees their childhood home and then reports, "This is not my home!"

If you find that these repeated requests are being met with added anxiety, agitation and restlessness, be sure to consult with your healthcare provider. It could be that additional medications may be warranted or it may be time for the person to move to a residential setting – particularly if it is wearing you down.

It is certainly heartbreaking to see growing confusion in your loved one. But with a compassionate approach and using strategies that keep your loved one comfortable, you can help your loved one feel more at home. Remember, home is where the heart is. As they feel your heart (and love), they will feel safer.