

The Bewitching Hours

Almost two-thirds of people living with dementia will experience what is known as “sundowning”. That is, increased confusion, anxiety, restlessness and/or agitation in the late afternoon/early evening. For some it may be only mildly concerning and last for a shorter period of time. But, for others it can create tremendous distress and last late into the day. When the person with dementia is distressed, the caregiver will likely become distressed as well.

The most common risk factors for sundowning include age, fatigue, and environmental factors, and changes in the brain that regulate normal sleep patterns. As dementia progresses, the person’s brain will fatigue much easier and quicker than in the past. With changes in lighting, too much/too little stimulation, there can be growing confusion and misinterpretation of even home environments. And, without a good night sleep and some rest periods during the day, it is not uncommon to see growing confusion.

Here are some strategies that can help to minimize sundowning:

- Keep a routine and be sure to build in rest periods throughout the day.
- Include physical exercise when possible and try to do engaging activities.
- Naps can be beneficial but avoid napping in bed later in the afternoon as when the person wakes up they are likely to think it is morning.
- As evening approaches, be sure to provide adequate lighting in the home so the person can better interpret what they are seeing.
- Be prepared for sundowning when it occurs. This means that you have things that can engage your loved one. This might include:
 - Give him something to do such as sweeping the floor, vacuuming, taking out the trash, clipping coupons. Repetitive motions can be very comforting and helps pass the time.
 - Avoid TV unless watching something that does not add to anxiety/agitation. Avoid the news! Perhaps you can (re)watch a taped sporting event, favorite old comedy or movie.
 - Put on some favorite music. Dance together, since together or just enjoy the quiet with calming music.
 - Provide a favorite snack and/or beverage. Avoid alcohol if possible but enjoy a happy hour using a favorite glass.
 - Have your family plan to give your loved one a call and provide an upbeat and fun conversation.
- Don’t be afraid to discuss concerns you have with your healthcare provider. Sometimes a medication may be needed.