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POST 3 For as long as I can remember...

“Hello Daddy-o!”

I’ve just come through the front door of my parents’ home and spotted my father in the living room. He’s cozied up in his favourite chair wearing a housecoat and slippers, watching television with my mother. They’re having evening tea and a cookie. It’s been a family tradition for as long as I can remember.

Dad sees me and smiles. He no longer knows that I am his son, but he definitely knows me. He recognizes my face and my voice – that much is clear.

It was the third week of February 2021. Lately I’d been spending a lot of time with my parents under trying circumstances. Dad was just shy of his 84th birthday and his Alzheimer’s disease had taken a turn for the worse. Among other things, my family and I were sorting out the arrangements for him to move into long-term care.

I don’t remember when I first started calling him ‘Daddy-o’. Years ago, probably, initially as a joke. But it occurred to me that I should start using it as my trademark greeting. Here’s why.

Dad doesn’t understand what COVID-19 is or why everyone is walking around with their faces covered. When he moved into long-term care, all of the staff

(but not the residents themselves) would be wearing masks. And when I started coming to visit, I'd be wearing a mask too. My thought was that the Daddy-o thing might make it easier for him to recognize me. Maybe it would, maybe it wouldn't. Regardless, when the pandemic ended and his condition continued to deteriorate, my hope was that Dad would still find my voice familiar. And comforting.

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By far the most challenging aspect of my parents' dementia journey has been Dad's loss of speech. Along with short-term memory issues, a shrinking vocabulary and difficulty finishing sentences was one of the first things we noticed prior to his 2014 diagnosis. This is not the case for everyone with Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia, but it is often a factor. Speech difficulties have made it hard for Dad to express himself and for my mother to know how to help him. This has contributed to feelings of isolation and loneliness for both of them.

I got my first glimpse of this communication asymmetry in 2018 when I spent a week with Dad while Mum was in the UK visiting family (her older brother had died of Lewy body dementia in January of that year). It was most noticeable at the kitchen table. Because I couldn't (or shouldn't!) talk and chew at the same time, mealtime conversations were very limited. If I didn't initiate a dialog, nothing was said. My siblings have had similar experiences, and it has helped us better understand some of the challenges that Mum has faced caring for Dad.

It hasn't all been bad. Just a few months back my father was still telling jokes – often with his eyes! A single word here, a smirk or eyeroll there, a well-placed shrug of the shoulders could tell you everything you needed to know about what he was thinking. Laughter often ensued.

There are a lot of amazing online resources to help caregivers, family and friends learn how to more effectively communicate with people with dementia. The [Alzheimer Society](http://www.alzheimersociety.org) is a great place to start. It's important to recognize that people with dementia often find it difficult to engage in one-to-one communication in group settings. In our case, while we have always loved our family gatherings with kids and grandkids aplenty, we came to learn that too many simultaneous conversations made it hard for Dad to feel comfortable.

Eating in smaller groups and making sure that he was the focus of regular attention helped a lot.

Other helpful tips for talking to people with dementia – maintaining eye contact, using simple words, speaking slowly, using gestures, etc. – can be found [here](#). I found it easier to converse with my father once I started making a conscious effort to consider how the things I did (or didn't do) might be contributing to his frustration. I became particularly sensitive to the importance of not speaking to Dad like he is a child and trying not to talk about him like he is not in the room. It takes patience, practice and respect. Did I mention patience?

One of the most helpful things my family and I have learned is to try and live in Dad's world: "*meet the person where they are and accept their new reality*". By this I (and the Alzheimer Society) mean resist the temptation to correct a person with dementia when they are confused or wrong. Connect, don't correct. Being unsure about what's happening around you must be very frightening. Constantly being corrected only serves to heighten the frustration and anxiety.

Striving to live in the moment – in their moment – helps both the person with dementia and their caregivers. As my father's words and sentences became less and less intelligible, I found it strangely liberating to respond to him with a simple nod, smile and "OK". It's OK if I don't immediately understand him. What's important is that I'm listening.

And watching. Non-verbal communication can be very effective if one is attuned to it. A subtle frown or grimace, a grin or guffaw – all are informative. In Dad's case, a sideways back-and-forth movement of one or both hands says he's had enough – it's time to put away the photo album or stop asking questions. A handshake is often his way of telling me our visit is over.

On a recent visit I mentioned that Dad's wife – my mother – had come to see him the day before. I was taken aback by his response. He seemed to be saying that it was his mother who had come to visit. This reminded me of something I had read in an amazing little book called [Be With: Letters to a Caregiver](#) by Toronto author Mike Barnes.

In the book Barnes describes how, during the course of his mother's dementia journey, her understanding of her own identity and that of her son changed. She asked for help identifying "*this friend, a tall man*":

"Are you my father? My brother? My husband? My grandfather?"

During the progression of the disease, ages and names become fluid. Facts blur into a haze of familiarity.

In my case, when I visit Dad in his new home, he now regularly asks me who I am, what my name is, where I live, and how I got there. That was hard at first, but I've gotten used to it. My mother has adorned his side of the room with family photos, which we use to remind Dad who he is and who we are to him. It doesn't matter if we do it all over again the next time. It's Dad's world. It is what it is.

Some visits are better than others. I try to come mid-morning, when he is more likely to be alert. Sometimes he's asleep but rouse-able, other times he's sleepy and not interested in seeing anyone. But sometimes you score. These are the visits you cherish.

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I'm given a fresh mask at the back door. Temperature taken and COVID-19 screening questions answered, a friendly staffer escorts me to Dad's room. I find him lying on his bed, taking a nap. I gently touch his shoulder.

"Hello Daddy-o", I say softly.

"It's your son John."

He opens his eyes and, a second later, smiles. He reaches out to take my hand.

Maybe it's my eyes or maybe it's my voice, but at that moment he knows who I am in every way that matters.

Resources

Communication challenges and helpful strategies (Alzheimer Society of Canada)

Alzheimer Society of Nova Scotia

Alzheimer Society of Canada