

Dementia Dilemma

Enter patient's world instead of trying to change it

By Jim Comer

Special to this section

My mother has struggled with Alzheimer's disease for 10 years now — and so have I. In the last decade, both of us have faced a long series of surrenders. Her losses were dramatic: driving, cooking, reading, writing and the house where she'd lived for 34 years.

Mine have been more subtle. Slowly, I have moved from denial to acceptance as Mother's world disappears, one inch at a time.

Last summer, she no longer knew who I was. Fortunately, she likes the friendly stranger I have become. I am grateful for Mom's resilient social skills and ready sense of humor. I'll take a good disposition over a cranky memory any day. Despite my share of mistakes along the way, I have learned a few hard-won lessons.

Patience is a virtue. No matter how many times Alzheimer's patients ask the same question, answer them. They don't need to be corrected, but loved.

For instance, Mother is fixated on the state of my gas tank. Every time I visit, she wants to know, "How are you fixed for gas?" That question comes up five or six times in each conversation and the only acceptable answer is "full tank." There is an upside to her prodding: I haven't run out of fuel in years.

Enjoy what remains. Our visits are not somber events, but filled with laughter. We admire flowers in the nursing home garden, lend our voices to sing-alongs and down more than our share of ice cream sundaes. Mother's memory is fragile, but her spirit is indefatigable. Her wit still breaks me up. When I showed up with scuffed loafers, she exclaimed, "Those shoes



are a scandal to the jaybirds! When are you going to get some new ones?" I replied that I'd get some when I got rich. She quipped, "Oh, honey, don't wait that long."

Keep your priorities straight. When she could still dress herself, Mother would wear only four of the fifty dresses hanging in her closet. No matter how many times I told her that all the clothes were hers, she believed that they belonged to other people. After months of debating this subject, I realized that I was off base. My job was to help keep her clothes clean, not question her wardrobe choices. Mother had moved beyond fashion.

Don't worry about appearances. A friend whose

husband has Alzheimer's came home to find him mowing the lawn in his underwear. She was horrified, but noticed the contented look on his face. She faced a stark choice. Would she worry about what the neighbors might say or allow him to continue a job that brought him obvious joy? She let him cut the grass in peace.

Let go. The best advice I ever got came from a nurse who worked with many Alzheimer's patients. She said, "Go into your Mother's world. Don't try to keep her in yours." I do my best to remember those words daily. I no longer burden Mom with facts she doesn't need to know. When she wants to go see her dead sister in Smithville, I tell her we'll go next week. Mother smiles contentedly and the thought disappears in seconds. Next week has never come.

Mother likes to tell people that Seton Hospital only charged her four dollars a day when I was born — and that I'm worth every penny of it. Now I've been given an opportunity to repay her investment.

Jim Comer is a speaker and writer living in Austin. His book, "Parenting Your Parents," will be published in March.