

## **Therapeutic Fibs and *Creative Communication Techniques***

In a society that stresses truth, the idea of not being completely truthful with a loved one who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia is understandably discomfoting for caregivers.

However, as discussed by the Family Caregiver Alliance, "Meticulous honesty can lead to distress when someone has dementia. If saying you're going to the doctor leads to resistance, isn't it OK to say the two of you are going out to lunch and then 'coincidentally' stop by the doctor's office on the way home?"

Therapeutic fibbing is a controversial yet very effective method of dealing with the anxiety experienced by many people with Alzheimer's and other dementias. In essence, it is telling a "fib" in order to avoid increased anxiety and agitation in a person with dementia. This article will discuss that YES; it is OK to use creative communication techniques with a loved one who is experiencing cognitive impairment. In fact, research has now indicated that this technique can help reduce caregivers' stress while reducing the stress of those with cognitive impairment as well.

Individuals with cognitive impairment who have lost their short-term memory are in a frightening place that we as caregivers may not always understand. For example, those with cognitive impairment "live in the past and rely on the comfort of memories from long ago. Anxiety results from not recognizing faces, not recognizing their environment, and/or realizing their own forgetfulness". It becomes important to put oneself in the shoes of your loved one and acknowledge how frightening it would be to no longer recognize your surroundings and have family members appear as strangers.

When using creative communication techniques, remember that you are not intending to deceive your loved one, but rather you are simply helping them feel more comfortable and that they are in a more agreeable and safe place. For example, creative communication techniques can be thought of as being *therapeutic* which means, "having or exhibiting healing powers". Thus, by using these techniques, you are helping to comfort your loved one's fear.

Many individuals and facilities have moved away from the use of re-orienting the person with dementia. Imagine having to re-live a loved one's death over and over again as someone explains that your parents are deceased and won't be coming for you. An answer could be, "Your parents will come for you in a little while. Let's eat lunch before they arrive". For that moment, you have spared them grief and anxiety, and offered them comfort in its place. It is in these instances that a therapeutic fib is especially appropriate and best utilized.

Many caregivers in our support groups have reported that it is difficult for them to use therapeutic fibs. If the caregiver is an adult child taking care of a parent who always stressed the importance of telling the truth, using fibs can be difficult and can induce feelings of guilt. Many grapple with the ethical issue of not being completely truthful with their loved one who has lived an authentic life. Although therapeutic fibs can benefit the caregiver's stress level, the primary goal is always to comfort the individual with dementia and to spare them unnecessary emotional upset. When placed in this context, it is seen as an act of kindness rather than deception.

It is obvious which alternative creates the least stress for your loved one. However, the question that remains is whether you as the caregiver will feel comfortable employing these techniques. It is important to remember that what works for one individual may not work for another, and what works in one situation may not work in another situation. Often, it is a matter of trial and error to find what works and is comfortable for you. While using these communication techniques, remind yourself that you are helping your loved one continue with a way of life that best suits their needs at that time.

Not all situations call for a therapeutic fib. Often there is no need for a response. Where before one might correct someone who thought it was June when it was actually January, perhaps no response is needed. There may be no harm in letting the person think it is June, and correction might make him or her anxious and lower self-esteem.

Re-orientation still has its place, however. Often the individual will ask where they are, what the date is, who you are, and these instances are very appropriate for re-orientation.

Another alternative to "fibbing" is distraction. This can be done by reminiscing, taking them for a walk, telling them a story, etc. Distraction can be a wonderful tool for getting the person off a certain subject or questions, and one can avoid the feelings of guilt associated with using a therapeutic fib.

Whether you use fibs, no response, re-orientation, distraction, or a combination of all four, the important thing is not to lose sight of the reasons these techniques are being used. A person with Alzheimer's or other dementia continually needs support, love and reassurance. By sparing them further anxiety and upset, even for a moment, you are providing them with these gifts.

In conclusion, creative communication techniques can not only relieve your loved one of emotional upset, but they can help to reduce your stress as well. Whereas these techniques may induce feelings of guilt amongst caregivers, it is important to remember that when they are performed using love and respect, you are doing all that you can do to maintain a high quality of life for your loved one.

Finally, don't forget to take time to commend yourself for being the amazing caregiver that you are!

## Caregiver/Person with Dementia Interaction Tips

- Use simple and exact words
- Reassure, reassure, reassure
- Do not disagree or argue with made-up stories
- Respond to the person's feelings, not their words
- Use distractions
- Do not try to reason with the person
- Give yourself permission to alter the truth for your loved one's sake
- Avoid asking questions that rely on memory
- Break down all tasks into simple steps
- Respond calmly to anger; don't contradict.
- Try to stay relaxed and SMILE.

For additional information or to request a copy of ***Compassionate Communication*** and ***Communication: Best ways to interact with the person with dementia***, contact the Alzheimer's Association Orange County Chapter at 800.272.3900.

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