

SEXUALITY & INTIMACY AND DEMENTIA

A person with dementia retains the basic human need to give and receive love. With the onset of the disease, the person may need to feel secure through the comfort and reassurance provided by others. As the disease progresses, the person may experience changes in sexual desire or may behave in ways that are not considered socially appropriate. These changes can be difficult for the person, their partners and others.

By understanding why behaviours occur and exploring ways to meet the physical and emotional needs of each person, we can help prevent difficult situations.

Misidentification and Misinterpretation

Some behaviors may be viewed as sexual when they are actually a response – a misinterpretation or misidentification of a person's action or response to a situation.

For example the person may:

- remove articles of clothing in a public place because the person may be hot or the clothing is uncomfortable
- make sexual advances toward their adult children as their child may look like the spouse when younger
- expose genitals in a public place because they may need to go to the washroom
- have forgotten social rules and fondle themselves or their partner in public
- flirt with the opposite sex or make unexpected gestures because they have forgotten they are married

Disease Related Changes

- The person may experience an increase in sexual desire and may act on these desires, appearing not to respect their partner's wishes.
- The person may become unrealistically jealous or suspicious of their partner.

PROVINCIAL - WINNIPEG 10-120 DONALD ST R3C 4G2 204-943-6622 alzmb@alzheimer.mb.ca

INTERLAKE / EASTERN - BEAUSEJOUR
TEL: 204-268-4752 | FAX: 204-268-4799
EMAIL: alzne@alzheimer.mb.ca

NORTH CENTRAL - PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE
TEL: 204-239-4898 | FAX: 204-239-0902
EMAIL: alznc@alzheimer.mb.ca

PARKLAND - DAUPHIN
TEL: 204-638-4483 | FAX: 204-638-4493
EMAIL: alzprk@alzheimer.mb.ca

SOUTH CENTRAL - WINKLER
TEL: 204-325-5634 | FAX: 204-325-6496
EMAIL: alzsc@alzheimer.mb.ca

SOUTH EASTMAN - STEINBACH
TEL: 204-326-5771 FAX: 204-326-5799
EMAIL: alzse@alzheimer.mb.ca

WESTMAN - BRANDON
TEL: 204-729-8320 FAX: 204-726-1082
EMAIL: alzwm@alzheimer.mb.ca

- The person may have lost the ability to initiate sexual relations and appear to have a decrease in sexual desire.
- The person may lose recognition of other people or places and is not able to make a distinction as to whether the action is appropriate towards another person or in a specific place.

Responding to Challenging Situations

- To help maintain the person's dignity, try not to scold them. These reactions are responses to the disease and not the person.
- Avoid arguing. Distract the person by redirecting to other meaningful activities.
- Providing appropriate physical contact such as hugging, hand holding and gentle touch will decrease the person's anxiety and provide reassurance. This could help to reduce uncomfortable situations.
- Guide them to a private place where they can express themselves without making others feel uncomfortable.
- Early in the disease, a couple may seek professional assistance where sexual issues can be discussed and options to cope explored.
- When the disease becomes more advanced, couples may decide to sleep apart.
- There are no easy solutions to these challenging situations. No one should experience physical, emotional or verbal abuse. Seek professional help if this is happening.
- Sexuality is a sensitive issue. It may help to talk about how you are feeling. The Alzheimer Society and Education and Support Meetings can help.

Updated November 2016

The Alzheimer Society of Manitoba's mission is to alleviate the individual, family and social consequences of Alzheimer's disease and related disorders while supporting the search for a cure.