

Missing again. . .Understanding the Behavior of those with Memory Loss

Dad has gone for a walk, something he's done for every morning for as long as his daughter can remember. Even with his decreasing memory, he loves being outside, walking down the street, talking to neighbors who are working in their yards. But one day he leaves for his walk as usual but doesn't come home. He's become lost and his family doesn't know where he is or what to do.

It is all too common to read of someone with memory deficits or a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease who gets lost. In fact according to the Alzheimer's Association at one time or another, six out of 10 people diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease will wander off and get lost. The results can be disastrous even fatal.

What happens when a man who walks in his neighborhood at the same time every day suddenly gets lost? What event or process occurs that prevents the individual from remembering and maintaining the routine? The key word to remember is *routine*. When someone has problems with memory, it is the routine that allows him to continue with his daily schedule and allows him the best level of functioning he has. In fact, this person can assume his best behavior and for short periods of time can fool strangers in thinking they are quite normal and have no memory problems. The best behavior can prevent others from recognizing the need for assistance.

Why do people with memory impairment wander? Reasons include changes in the normal route, chasing the family dog that runs off, lack of activity or boredom, anger, being in an unfamiliar place, confusion about plans or time, being in a noisy or stressful environment or trying to go to work although they have been retired for years. Aimless walking or wandering can be a natural release and should be encouraged within a safe place. It gives the person something to do, is physical exercise, and encourages participation in an activity.

Who are at risk for wandering? Family members may feel that their loved one will never wander. Put in a specific situation, anyone can wander. Wandering is walking or driving unable to remember the destination or the way to get back. It's important to notice if the individual has difficulty remembering familiar places in the house such as the bathroom, his bedroom or the dining room. Does the person become agitated, restless or anxious in a new surrounding? Has the person lived for years in one location and always talks about "going home"? Does the person constantly need the primary caregiver within eyesight? Once out of sight, does the individual start looking for that person?

What are the risks when someone wanders? Wandering usually happens during normal activities when someone gets disoriented or there's an unexpected change in the routine.

- Of those diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia, 59% will get lost.
- If not located within 24 hours of last being seen, 46% may die from hypothermia and dehydration.
- The more unsure they are, the less likely they will contact someone for help. They will seldom admit the need for help.
- When found, they may be unable to remember their name, address, or family members to contact. They may say they live in Palo Alto when they moved to their current address ten years ago.

How can wandering be reduced? Unless the person is under constant surveillance which is unrealistic, there are ways to reduce the possibility of wandering. Some effective ideas may include:

- Incorporate regular exercise and walking into the daily routine with someone accompanying the individual. Let the memory impaired individual lead the way. Leave the same time, out the same door, in the same direction, and return the same way each time so it becomes a routine in itself. You may want to alternate outside exercise with walking up/down the hallway or dancing to music to use when

the weather is inclement and unable to be outside. Again put this into the same time slot for the same length of time.

- It's important to have certain rooms in the house that the person can walk into and explore. Label rooms in the house particularly the bathroom, the person's individual bedroom, etc. If there are rooms not allowed into, either lock the doors or put a large picture of a STOP sign on the doors and close them. A STOP sign may also be a deterrent for the outside doors as well.
- Install locks either high out of the normal line of vision or at the bottom of exterior doors. Lock/unlock when the individual is not looking on. Mirrors installed on the door may also deter the individual from going out the door when they see themselves in the mirror.
- If you feel comfortable leaving the doors unlocked, hang bells on each outside door so you can hear when a person opens the door. You also can install buzzers when the door is opened.
- When there are plans to re-locate the person, do it in gradual stages. Make sure supervision is increased to reassure the individual when questions arise and he is not tempted to start off alone.
- Don't leave a person with memory deficits alone in a car, sitting alone in a mall or having him go in for a prescription by himself. He may not remember you are in the store or cannot remember why he is alone. If he's still driving, it's not only risky but he may very well go off and leave you forgetting you were with him in the first place.

With all the precautions taken in advance, it certainly is possible for the individual to still get out, wander off, and get lost. Knowing in advance that the possibility exists can help the family put together a plan "just in case". Take the person's picture every few months so there is a current picture to circulate should you need to. Label clothes or use iron on tape to put identification in outerwear or favorite shirts. Wallets and purses are often lost as a person becomes more disoriented and agitated. Make a conscious effort to note the time the person left, where they were headed and what they were wearing. Start looking for her when you think she should return. If you're busy, set the oven timer as a reminder. It's a good idea to write down a physical description of the person prior to the emergency since it's sometimes hard to remember important details in times of stress. Indicate whether the person is left-handed or right-handed. Right-handed people tend to turn right. Include any particular details that might help in the search i.e., a peculiar walk, wearing a raincoat regardless of the weather, or an obsession with ice cream. Does the person have access to money? Does he still drive? The more succinct details you can provide, the greater chance of locating the individual timely.

Before too much time elapses:

- Search in and around the house and familiar places close by. Call for the person calmly by name. Tell her it's time for supper if she likes to eat or time for her favorite soap opera. If she's hiding, it may entice her out in the open.
- Call the police telling them of the person's memory impairment, out of character behavior and urgency of the situation.
- If there are dangerous areas near your home i.e., rivers, freeway or wilderness, be sure and tell law enforcement.
- When they arrive to take the report, have the picture, physical description ready with description of clothes the individual was wearing that day. Give them the time you last saw the person and where she was headed. Did she have the family dog with her? If so, give a description. If person is new to area, give law enforcement a brief description of situation, previous home, etc.
- If there are special medical problems or if the person wears a medical I.D. bracelet, include that information with the physical description.
- Call your neighbors and family members particularly if they live close by. Have someone stay by the phone if you begin to look so the search can be coordinated.
- If the individual uses local transit, call their main office and alert them to the disappearance.
- Don't be embarrassed to ask help in searching from friends, co-workers and church groups.

When the missing person is found, be sure and have someone call everyone to let them know the person is safe.

It's critical to remember that the disease causes the behaviors. The individual truly doesn't remember how to come home. The longer he/she are away, the worse their memory becomes as they can't remember more and

more. When a person with memory impairment is found, assure him/her you still love them, you're not mad, and he/she didn't do anything wrong. He doesn't have the ability to modify his behavior. She won't remember next week that she was lost trying to find the car in the parking lot. It's up to the spouse, primary caregivers and family to set the boundaries, provides the supervision, and try to keep them safe.

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