

## Preventing & Responding to Stress Reactions

### Empowerment Tool

As dementia progresses, a person may have difficulty expressing what they need. When this happens, behavior may become a means of communicating. The unpredictability of these changes in behavior can be stressful for caregivers. Anticipating behavior changes and the root cause can be extremely helpful in learning to prevent stress reactions and responding in the moment.

#### TIPS FOR UNDERSTANDING EXPRESSIONS OF NEED

- **Responding.**

Ask yourself why your care partner is this way. Is their agitation an expression of pain? Is their reduced appetite due to ill-fitting dentures? Back up to what was happening just before the stress reaction – this may hold the clue to what the behavior means.

- **Look for a pattern.**

Talk with other members of your care team (including family) and see if you can observe a pattern related to the behavior. Does the person respond or react this way at the same time of day or in the same situation?

- **Be positive.**

Behavior that is met with a positive response will generally be repeated. Don't be condescending, but somewhat encouraging. We all like to feel that something we do is appreciated and done well.

- **Look at your nonverbal communication.**

People living with dementia can be sensitive to changes in facial expression, posture, mood, or tone of voice. Take a minute to assess what message your face, mood, and body position may be communicating.

- **Smile!**

We've heard it a hundred times, but a smile can go a long way. When your smile may make the most significant difference is when it's the most challenging to do. So, take a deep breath, count to 3, smile and be positive.

- **Validate, join and distract.**

One effective method for managing a stress reaction is to connect with the person's emotion, then calmly and gently redirect the conversation or activity. If, for instance, they insist on wanting to leave, your response might be, "I know you miss your daughter. I see these pictures of her. Can you show me your beautiful family?" And redirect them to the family photo album.

- **Step back when necessary.**

Stress reactions can often be spontaneous and sometimes a person will respond physically. Never argue or be assertive back. The safety of both you and your care partner is always a priority. It's okay to pause, take a breath, and ask for someone else to take over.