

How Can Rabbis Assist Family Members of Persons with Dementia?

Understand that caregiving for a person with memory loss is more challenging, difficult, and all-encompassing than caregiving for those with other diseases & can last for a very long time (average between 8-10 years since Alzheimer's diagnosis). Dementia is ever changing and family care partners need help and support throughout the many transitions of the disease.

Reach out to families and the person with dementia as soon as they are aware of the diagnosis (or before when appropriate) and continue to reach out throughout the disease progression. Encourage congregants to contact you or the synagogue office for support.

Be available to counsel families:

- To help alleviate feelings of loneliness, shame, guilt, grief, uncertainty, and fear.
- Who are in disagreement or in denial of changes occurring with their loved one and who are not on the same page as to care decisions.
- Promote care partners' wellness including respite and assist them in the process of letting go of the notion that they need or can do everything on their own.
- Making difficult care choices including placement in a long-term care residence and preparation for decisions regarding end of life.
- Facilitate the process of finding strength and comfort in faith.
- Assist family care partners in the challenging process of reflection on the meaning of memory loss in the context of one's faith in God, Jewish values, and beliefs (including efforts to resolve feelings of anger and questioning certain notions of faith). Help to affirm the legitimacy of being angry and arguing with God (Avraham Avinu and Levi Yitzchak come to mind).
- Assist in meeting religious and spiritual needs of the person *and* the care partners.

- Helping care partners accept the “new normal” (i.e., the ongoing changes).
- Help connect the family with other members of the congregation who are going through or have gone through similar experiences. Consider starting a support group in the congregation or working with another congregation to offer a joint support group.

Help the family help the person:

- Develop and suggest ideas in which the person with Alzheimer’s can play a role in the congregational community.
- Teach family members how to use traditional Jewish prayers, rituals, and objects to create a meaningful experience for the person (while making adjustments related to cognitive disabilities).
- Recruit other congregants to provide support for the family (companions; volunteers).
- Develop and offer education programs for family members on Alzheimer’s disease, coping with denial, approaches, communication techniques (e.g., Validation Method), and engagement in meaningful activities (include grandchildren).
- Develop and offer programs and services tailored specifically to individuals with memory loss.
- Be ready to refer family members to community resources such as Alzheimer’s Association, memory clinics, adult day programs, JFCS, JFS, and counseling services.
- **Re-Member!!!** Facilitate acceptance by members of the congregation and the community to reduce stigma and myths about individuals with Alzheimer’s disease.