

Naomi's Clinical Column from the Spring 2017 Newsletter

Maintaining Independent Functioning in very Old People Diagnosed with "Severe Alzheimer's Dementia"

Geriatrician's Diagnostic Summary:

George J., an 88-year-old male, with cardiac insufficiency, suffers from severe dementia. He cannot perform Activities of Daily Living. He is able to ambulate only with the help of a caregiver and his walker. When he becomes aggressive, acts out sexually, and/or is agitated; Mellaril, reduces his acting out behaviors.



Validation Consultant Summary:

Social History: George J. began a successful construction company at the age of 25. He was born in 1929 in Youngstown, Ohio, where he has lived his entire life, except for a brief stint in the Army during World War II. He is extremely Time Confused, and believes he is still in Youngstown. He has no idea where he is in time and place. He has lost his self-awareness, awareness of his body in space, his sensory acuity, and his social awareness. He expresses his physical and emotional needs with no inhibitions.

He is the youngest of four children. His wife, with whom he had an intimate relationship, died three years ago. Two of his siblings have died. He believes they are alive. He moved to San Francisco to live near his daughter. His daughter, Polly, recalls that her father was "puritanical, inhibited, and always socially appropriate." He believes he still lives in Youngstown, and often mistakes his daughter for his wife or his mother. I am exploring his life with him, using Validation techniques, "re-phrasing," "polarity," and reminiscing.

I am trying to teach these Validation techniques to his caregiver, who resists change. She cannot accept the damage to Mr. J's brain, his loss of time and place, and social controls. She needs to control.

Here is a record of one of their daily interactions:

9:30 a.m.

George J: Where am I?

Caregiver: George, you are in San Francisco. Now sit still so that I can put on your shirt.

9:50 a.m.

George J: Where am I?

Caregiver: I told you, George. You are in San Francisco.

George J: When do I go back to Youngstown?

Caregiver: Never. I want you to stop asking so many questions so that I can get you dressed.

10:00 a.m.

George J: Where am I?

Caregiver: This is the last time I will answer that question. You are in San Francisco. Now, be quiet and behave yourself.

George J: What grade am I in?

Caregiver: George, no more questions! Be quiet.

George J: When do I go back to Youngstown?

Caregiver is silent.

George J: When do I go back to Youngstown?

Caregiver: (leaning over to button his pants)

George J: (raising his prominent, bushy eyebrows with a leer) You've got cute boobs. (He reaches to touch her breast) Who is this broad? (He winks, twitches his fingers, playfully.)

George J: Who dee hi...do do-Ha Ha-Hee Hee-(he sings, joyfully) I need a back rub. You can rub me here, too. (He tries to guide her hand to his penis.)

Caregiver: George, you had better behave. Watch your mouth.

George J: What am I doing here? Where am I?

Caregiver: (She picks up her phone and calls Mr. J's daughter.) "Jessie, your father is impossible! He needs the tranquilizer to quiet him. If I didn't need the money to support my kids, I'd quit right now."

Daughter: Joan, please don't give him the medication yet. I'm sending over the Validation Worker to help.

Caregiver: (Relates Mr. J's sexual outburst to the Validation Worker.)

VW: (with empathy) This acting out of sexual behavior is hard to take, isn't it, Joan? Is that what bothers you the most about Mr. J.?

Caregiver: He repeats over and over, where am I? Where am I? Every two seconds. I can't stand him. He is driving me crazy. He whines and he makes up stupid songs; he tries to grab me with those disgusting fingers. Yuk!

VW: You want him to behave as an adult?

Caregiver: I think his behavior is sick. I told you before; he should be in a mental hospital.

(The caregiver is a bit relieved after venting her feelings freely. She and the VW have met once a week for the past three weeks, and have established an open relationship)

VW: How old is your eldest son?

Caregiver: What has that got to do with anything?

VW: I wonder if he ever gets on your nerves.

Caregiver: Jason? Well, he doesn't repeat the same question every two seconds.

VW: (smiling) That's a relief. How old is he?

Caregiver: 17. OK, he does act stupid sometimes.

VW: What does he do that bothers you the most?

Caregiver: He swears. I taught him that swearing is evil. It's the devil in him. And Lord knows what he does with that tramp he goes with.

VW: Joan, can you remember when you were 17?

Caregiver: I didn't swear, for one.

VW: Did you ever get mad at your Mom? Think back. Be honest.

Caregiver: (Thinking hard) She smacked me for wearing a low-cut dress.

VW: What did you do?

Caregiver: I shut up. I cut up the dress.

VW: Did that hurt?

Caregiver: It hurt bad. I never forgot it. But I never told her.

VW: When you swallow strong painful feelings, they grow, inside. Do you think you'll feel better after you tell me how you felt? (long silence.)

Caregiver: I hated her for a long time.... Yes, it feels good to say it after all these years.

VW: Mr. J's daughter told me that he was a sweet man. He never yelled. He was always controlled. Not once did he say a bad word. He slapped her when he found her kissing her boyfriend. He never said the word, "sex."

Caregiver: Well, he's certainly making up for it now.

VW: Right! When he expresses his anger, and sexual feelings, after all these years of stuffing them, he is struggling to heal himself, to lessen his pain. Do you think you can learn to "Center," and listen?

The Caregiver looks at the VW, and nods, slowly.

The VW meets once a week with the caregiver, teaching her to "Center," "Re-phrase," and Reminisce. The Caregiver learns to understand Mr. J's acting out of sexual behavior. Once released, without judgement, Mr. J's acting out behaviors lessen. The Caregiver learns over time, to accept the damage to Mr. J's brain, his recent memory loss and listen without judgment. Slowly, Mr. J. restores his dignity.