



Help for Caregivers Coping with Alzheimer's

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For Joseph Weber, associate professor of sociology and coordinator of Cal State Fullerton's gerontology program, it began when his mother forgot how to make oatmeal.



Joseph Weber

His mother, who fixed oatmeal every morning for breakfast, discovered one day that she couldn't remember what to do after she boiled the water.

"With Alzheimer's disease, the initial decline is often quite gradual," Weber explained. "In my studies of those caring for individuals with Alzheimer's, I often find there is a specific event that demonstrates that this isn't just ordinary forgetfulness."

With an estimated 4 million Americans suffering from Alzheimer's, more attention is being paid not only to those with the disease but to their caregivers, who often are family members.

"I found that Alzheimer's in the abstract is very different from Alzheimer's on a personal level," Weber said. "Frequently, there is denial that there is a problem. Then, there's an 'event.' With my mother, it was the oatmeal incident that caught my attention."

According to Weber, Alzheimer's tends to fall into three stages. In the first stage, forgetfulness becomes more frequent.

Caregivers can help by keeping the person with Alzheimer's as active as possible, doing things they used to enjoy, Weber said. For instance, if individuals liked to cook, have them help by doing dishes or assisting with food preparation.

"At this point, caregivers perhaps haven't started to come to terms with what is happening," he said. "There is a tendency to mask, hide or excuse forgetful behavior."

At the second stage, caregivers will notice a tendency for the person to get lost in familiar areas, repeat themselves within short periods of time, use the wrong name for things (such as identifying a spoon as a fork), or get confused about time and place.

"This can be a very frustrating stage for caregivers," Weber said.

By the third stage, the individual has no sense of reality and often is moved to a nursing home.

"Caring for someone with Alzheimer's becomes a 24-hour-a-day job," Weber said.

In 2001, Weber published a study on caregivers in the *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* where he surveyed caregivers' strategies for successful coping. Here are some tips from what he learned:

- Get help as soon as possible.
- Seek adult daycare services and support groups for caregivers.
- Take care of yourself.
- Recognize that caring for someone with Alzheimer's exacts a toll.
- Do your best to avoid conflict.
- Keep a journal. Weber said caregivers often expressed that a journal was a good place to describe their feelings and to record memories.

"As we live longer, the number of those with Alzheimer's will continue to grow," Weber said. "It's important to work on cures for Alzheimer's, but it's also important to develop ways to care for the caregivers." ■