*Here are a few tips for caring for **your loved** one with dementia.*

- Remember that they are their own person. Do not assume that they will act or behave the same as any other person with a similar diagnosis. There is no correlation between personality that they may have had prior to the disease onset and the personality that develops as the disease progresses.

- Consider what stage your loved one is in when making decisions about the level of care they require. Don't make the mistake of assuming that just because they have never done (ie: wondering, being aggressive or being verbally abusive) that they are never going to experience that. What I tell caregivers and those with dementia is that safety must come first. If there is a concern about their ability to drive and you're not quite sure whether or not you should be taking away the keys, then have a driving assessment done. If they are reluctant to allow you to assist with financial matters or medication management, I recommend having this conversation with your loved one's healthcare provider to establish their level of competency in these matters. Again, safety first.

- It is crucial that you establish a schedule and stick to it as much as you possibly can. You will find that your loved one will do much better when they have a predictable routine. This means they have set a wake-up time and bedtime schedule. Meals at preplanned times. Establish a nighttime routine such as brushing teeth, washing their face and putting on their pajamas. This will subconsciously tell them that it's time to unwind and get ready to go to sleep for the night. Even after conversational memory fails, procedural memory still exists. Procedural memory is what allows us to go about our daily routine and do things without thought. This would include activities of daily living such as brushing our teeth, washing our hands, getting dressed and feeding ourselves. These are all things that we learned at some point in our life. An established routine supports the procedural memory.

- Monitor your loved one's diet. It is important to provide a well-balanced nutritious meal plan for your loved one. We know that sugar cravings are common with those suffering from memory loss however excessive sugar and carbohydrate intake can cause brain fog. Consider using sweets as a reward after finishing a nutritious meal.

- Avoid overstimulation. Being in large groups with a lot of commotion or conversation can be very disorienting to your loved one. You'll find that they will do much better in small groups no larger than 3 to 4 people at a time. This can be a challenge when your normal routine involves being in public where there are large groups of people such as church, clubs and other gathering spots. If you notice that your loved one is starting to withdraw or become unusually quiet take that as a sign that they are being overstimulated and need to be removed from the situation.

- Provide opportunities to allow your loved one to feel a sense of accomplishment as well as maintaining independence at a level that maintains safety for them. Try to avoid answering questions for them, performing activities for them, or jumping in and making decisions when they are possibly still able to make those decisions for themselves. Everyone, regardless of where they are at in their life and what they're expecting, wants to feel as though they are productive and contributing to a greater cause. Although your intentions may be well-placed, ultimately it is not helpful to them to assume all roles and responsibilities that they are still able to manage safely. Trust me when I tell you this is a difficult one!

- Simplify and declutter. That's worth repeating. Simplify and declutter. Avoid any excessive decorations or items that may confuse your loved one. For example, look at the bathroom countertop and see if everything that is on there is necessary. Fewer items mean fewer distractions and ultimately this will make it easier for your loved one to complete tasks without distraction and increased confusion.

- Always monitor for infection. It is not usual that someone will have a sudden decline, so until proven otherwise, assume that there is some unidentified infection that is worsening their cognitive status. Perhaps the most common infection is a urinary tract infection. Unlike when we were younger, and there were classic signs and symptoms of urinary tract infection, as we get older, we may lose those signs and perhaps the only clue to the infection is a sudden change in mental status. This may be someone hallucinating when they previously did not. It may be that they are talking in a nonsensical speech pattern where previously it was easy to understand them. They may not have any fever. They may not have a complaint. If you notice a sudden decline you need to get them urgently evaluated. Once treated, you should find that they will improve and if they don't return to pre-infection status they will certainly improve after the infection has been treated. Again, this is when you are the eyes and ears of your loved one's healthcare provider. If something doesn't feel right and something seems unusual, chances are you're picking up on an infection.