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Every person with dementia who can walk or drive is at risk of becoming lost. Alzheimer’s of Central Alabama is working to reduce the dangers of wandering by providing Project Lifesaver bracelets that emit a radio tracking signal. The bracelets have a 100% success rate in Alabama for safe returns. ACA bracelets are available in Jefferson and Bibb Counties. Most Alabama Sheriff’s departments and the Alabama State Troopers provide bracelets. The bracelets are not intended for patients who are driving because they can quickly get out of range. Every person with dementia who can walk or drive is at risk of becoming lost which can lead to dangerous consequences. Every person with dementia who is still driving should be protected by a GPS system that can help their family or law enforcement locate them if they become lost.

The nature of this disease creates unique challenges to locating a wandering patient. They can easily become disoriented and can get lost in places that we would normally consider familiar, like their neighborhood or even their local Walmart. They may not hear or respond to attempts to call out to them. Patients are vulnerable and can succumb to the elements quickly. Nothing takes the place of caregiver vigilance – which means the best way to keep your loved one safe from wandering is to be constantly aware and use your eyes and ears. It can happen at any stage of the disease. The factors that often lead to wandering are restlessness, disorientation and boredom.

COMMON CAUSES OF WANDERING:
- Searching for something or someone familiar or simply trying to satisfy a basic need, such as hunger or thirst—but they’ve forgotten what to do or where to go. Many wanderers are looking for a bathroom.
- Escaping from something like too much stimulation—a loud TV or a lively conversation, even the noise of pots and pans in the kitchen.
- Reliving the past by trying to go to work or looking for children.

STRATEGIES THAT MAY HELP:
- Immediately redirect to a productive activity or exercise if the patient is pacing or restless. Offer constant reassurance.
- Look for patterns. If the patient gets restless in the late afternoon be prepared every afternoon. Go for a walk or a drive. Have a lemonade break. Find what works to distract.
- Never leave the patient alone or unattended. Be sure neighbors know to call if they see the patient unattended.
- Install child-safety devices or alarms in your home to keep doors and windows secured.

If there is a 60% chance of rain do you prepare and consider the weather in your plans? Would you leave your car windows rolled down? After all, there is a 40% chance it won’t rain. Caregivers of dementia patients take a similar gamble when they don’t consider the very real possibility their loved one with dementia will wander – 60% of dementia patients wander at some point and many do so repeatedly. This is the most dangerous, and potentially deadly dementia behavior.

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Upcoming Events

- May 6 – Garden Art Party - Iron City
- August 29 – Lunch and Learn at Danberry - Inverness
- September 7 – Glow for a Cure, night golf tournament - Highland Park Golf Course
- October 17 – Alzheimer’s in Alabama, ACA’s annual conference - Canterbury United Methodist Church
- October 30 – Lunch and Learn - St. Martin’s
- November 3 – Lights out for Alzheimer’s - Atrox Factory
- November 4 – Walking to Remember inside the Riverchase Galleria
- November 12 – Day of Prayer

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- St. Martin’s

Ten Commandments of Alzheimer’s Caregiving

1. I am still me... I may forget parts of my life but I will never forget that I am an adult deserving dignity. Neither should you. My memories may go but my personality stays.

2. Treat me like an adult. My behavior may be child-like, but NEVER treat me like child. No baby talk!

3. Come into my world, I can’t function in yours. This means that I can’t remember what happened 5 minutes ago but I can remember something from 50 years ago. Please don’t argue with me, I don’t understand why you are angry and I feel terrible for hours afterwards.

4. Actions are better than words. No big explanations, a gentle touch or hug and a warm smile go a long way.

5. Give me a daily, consistent schedule. Consistent schedules tap the memories that I have and strengthen the parts of the brain that are still working. I feel better with schedules, even if I cannot remember them.

6. Give me nature. I need fresh air and sunshine. Please make sure I get out every day, even if it is on a porch or patio, or near a big bay window, where I can watch the birds.

7. Give me pleasurable activities. I may forget that you took me out to lunch, or we went fishing, but the pleasurable feelings and emotions that came from that experience will last for hours.

8. Give me social interaction on my terms. I can’t handle large gatherings but I can visit with a couple of people, especially if they are following Commandment #3. Again, I may forget that the grandkids came to visit, but the pleasurable feelings and emotions from that visit will persist hours after the visit.

9. Keep me safe. That means giving me the freedom to move about my home as much as possible without falling or getting hurt. You may need to be creative, like hanging pictures of a bookshelf over a door to keep me from leaving.

10. Keep me healthy. Help me to eat good foods to stay as healthy as possible, and help me to avoid infections.

Submitted by Dr. Rita Jablonski-Jaudon, an Associate Professor at the UAB School of Nursing. In addition to teaching and research responsibilities, Dr. Jablonski-Jaudon is a nurse practitioner at the Kirklin Clinic’s Memory Disorder Clinic.