

Grab Your Facemask... And Theirs, Too.

By Nicolas K. Los Banos

Remember when we first started adding hand sanitizer to our household shopping lists and stores ran out of toilet paper? Our planning and decision-making skills went into overdrive as we learned about this virus, sewing facemasks, and at least five different DIY ways to make disinfectants. Over the last year-and-a-half, these things have become our new “normal,” but for a segment of the population, much of this hasn’t taken hold... and likely never will.

My 96-year-old nana has been living with dementia for several years and her short-term memory is largely gone. When we entered lockdown in March of 2020 and tried to explain the situation there was a moment of shock each time, but then she’d forget all about it, at least until she saw the next COVID-19 news report.

Getting nana to adhere to the COVID-19 etiquette by wearing a face mask, using hand sanitizer, and social distancing was next to impossible without a fuss. Luckily, she understands vaccinations (she has taken many in her long life!) so that went smoothly. I admit, we said it was “for the flu” because the term “coronavirus” was one she couldn’t grasp. In the field, we call this a “therapeutic fib” which people may criticize. However, it comes down to asking yourself, “How smoothly do you want this moment to go?” If the answer is “quite horribly,” then you can try to prove your point, but arguing with someone who has dementia is usually a lost battle.

The National Institutes of Health found that people with dementia were found to have a higher risk of getting COVID-19, are more likely to require hospitalization, and are more likely to have severe or fatal cases of this disease compared with people without dementia. Although they may be able to sense that things are tense and different, a person with dementia may not understand or remember what’s going on in the world, lack the ability to remember recently-learned information and may struggle with activities outside of their normal routine. This affects proper use of face masks, hand hygiene, and adhering to social distancing.

Pandemic aside, the behaviors that accompany this stage already present challenges for our caregivers and ‘ohana. Even small changes in the usual day-to-day routine of someone living with dementia can trigger behaviors such as anxiety, anger, or suspicion. All of these are also likely to increase caregiver stress levels. COVID-19 has brought some added challenges to a caregiver’s day. Availability of adult day programs and other home and community-based services may be interrupted. The unusual PPE (gowns, masks, and face shields) worn by

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healthcare providers can also be scary to some individuals with dementia. My heart breaks for those living at skilled nursing facilities who can only visit their loved ones through a glass window.

We are all on a COVID-19 journey together. Most of us remember to grab our facemasks when heading out, but for those who can't, let's help by remembering theirs, too.

Nic Los Banos is the Hawai'i Island Regional Coordinator for the Alzheimer's Association. If you or someone you know is on a journey with Alzheimer's disease or other dementia, please reach out to the Alzheimer's Association Aloha Chapter by phone at 808-591-2771 or by email at alohainfo@alz.org. You can also find information on COVID-19 and caregiving at alz.org/hawaii. A 24/7 Helpline is also available at 800-272-3900.

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