

# Responding Successfully to Denial Behaviors

By: Rachel Ludwiczak

Denial usually involves issues of control, trust, and needs. The following advice on responding successfully to denial behaviors was compiled through interviews with Beth O'Toole, M.D., an assistant professor of medicine and biomedical ethics at Case Western Reserve University and University Hospitals; Savine Gross-Weizman, Ph.D., a psychologist in private practice; and Ann Wetzler, LISW, a clinical social worker specializing in mid-life and geriatric counseling.

## ***When the Diagnosed Person Says:***



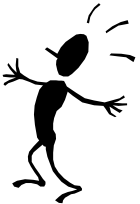
***“I don’t have a problem. Only sometimes I forget things.”***

- Do not vigorously challenge the person. Be supportive and recognize his or her anxiety.
- “Let the light in gradually” by asking what they think is going on.
- Ask them, “You’ve gone to see Dr. X.; is there something with which you are feeling uncomfortable? What are you feeling?”
- Tell them that a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease takes time, but that their memory problems need to be addressed.
- Address the issue gently, slowly, and more than one time. Discuss the issue in “measured amounts.”



***“I can still manage my own affairs.”***

- Check to see if the bills are being paid on time.
- Involve an outside third party to help see the “big picture.”
- Recognize and encourage any abilities that the person may have to manage his or her affairs.
- Let the person articulate his or her opinions and listen to what is being said.
- Give the person as much choice as possible, even if it is something as simple as what to buy at the grocery store.



***“If I couldn’t drive safely, I wouldn’t drive.”***

- Appeal to reason: “Dad, you’ve had three accidents this past year.”
- Ask the person to get an independent opinion from a private testing service.
- Offer alternatives such as driving the diagnosed around when he or she needs to go out. Find out what public transportation is available in the area.
- Recognize that the person is viewing driving as “control over my life.” Emotionally, that is the issue you need to deal with, providing reassurance by encouraging your loved one’s autonomy in areas where safety is not an issue.



***“I don’t want to live with a lot of old people.”***

- Recognize that a competent elder legally makes the decision.
- Don’t wait too long to address the issues.
- Determine what is realistic within the boundaries of your lifestyle.
- Recognize and accept limits without guilt.
- Help the individual maintain as much autonomy as possible.
- Help keep the surroundings familiar with pictures and mementos.
- Introduce them to other people and help them make new friends and adjustments.

### ***When Concerned Others Say:***



***“There’s nothing wrong with your father. It’s just old age.”***

- Ask them what they think is going on with the person right now.
- Be flexible. Ask for support and help. Give them suggestions on how they can help you.
- Give them time to adjust and plan. Do not press the diagnosis.

- Understand that people make excuses to deal with difficult events.
- Address the issue gently, slowly, and more than one time. Discuss the issue in “measured amounts.”
- People are sometimes afraid it will happen to them. Help them to learn the facts.



***“They’re trying to take all your money.”***

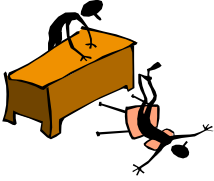
- Set up a private family meeting to discuss all of the issues. Let everyone have the opportunity to discuss their opinions.
- Determine if it is a real interest in the parent or a self-interest causing the problems. An objective party, such as a minister or counselor, can help resolve such issues.
- Have the parent set up a Power of Attorney while they are still competent.
- Set up an interdisciplinary meeting with family, physicians, nurses, and social workers to discuss the issues.



***“ What do you mean you took away Mom’s car keys!”***

- Appeal to reason: “Mom had three accidents so far this year.”
- Talk about the alternatives available for the person.
- Ask why they are disagreeing.

- Sort out who is the legitimate spokesperson for this situation.
- Talk about the safety of the diagnosed and others.



***“ She’s dumping Dad in a home and robbing him blind.”***

- Ask others to spend time with the diagnosed to determine for themselves the level of care needed.
- Have an outsider explain to others what is involved in taking care of a care of a person with Alzheimer’s disease.
- Seek additional support from other family members or government agencies.
- Have a physician discuss with others “what is best for Dad.” This will help keep the issue focused.
- Explain that the purpose is to take care of Dad in the best way.
- Be alert to potential conflicts of interest, and seek an objective opinion to help reconcile any differences.

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