

Tips on Searching for Persons with Dementia

Definition of Terms

Dementia – set of symptoms that occur when a disease destroys the brain slowly including:

loss of short term and long term memory

poor judgment

loss of abstract thinking and problem-solving

Alzheimer's Disease – a disease that results in destruction of brain tissues over a 15-20 year period causing dementia

Other dementing illnesses – Parkinson's disease, strokes

Why do persons with dementia (PWD) become lost in the community?

Dementing illnesses make a person particularly susceptible to becoming lost in the community. The changes in memory result in PWD forgetting their address their name or who they live with; and not being able to recognize familiar areas such as their street or home. The changes in judgment cause them to enter unsafe situations that may lead to their death, most notably entering secluded natural areas such as woods and remaining there until they die. Because their abstract thinking is impaired, they will leave the house to find the caregiver who may actually just be in another room; they will not recognize that they need help, and are unable to seek help appropriately. For instance, the previously familiar dress of a policemen may now be unrecognizable to them. It is often up to law enforcement or good samaritans to recognize that a PWD needs help.

Some PWD wander and may become lost when they wander outside of the home. However, PWD may become lost when they are out with their caregiver and become lost when they get separated; when the PWD gets mad and leaves the home in anger; when the caregiver is distracted or asleep; when the PWD is on normal outings such as a walk around the block: and, when being cared for in professional settings such as personal care homes and adult day care. All PWD are at risk for becoming lost in the community; it can happen early or late in the disease and even if the PWD never wanders. Becoming lost in the community is a completely unpredictable event and strategies must be used to prevent PWD from dying when they become lost.

Where do PWD tend to go when they are lost?

Often the PWD will wander around the neighborhood and can be found in nearby front and backyards. Other common places include streets, highways and easily accessible buildings such as convenience stores, hospitals, and businesses.

Unfortunately some PWD who are lost seek seclusion in natural areas. These can be woods, thick bushes, swamps, rivers, lakes/ponds, and remote fields. When this occurs, the person is very difficult to find and often succumbs to exposure and dies. For some reason, once the individual enters these secluded areas they do not leave despite becoming cold, overheated, dehydrated and hungry. Also searchers can walk within a few feet of them, and they will not respond to calls or initiate action to get help. In many cases, unless a searcher literally walks into the PWD, they will not be found and will die even in well-searched areas.

When PWD are found alive or dead, the location and direction they have gone rarely make logical sense. Searchers often are fooled by assuming that the PWD is successfully navigating to a certain location. While caregivers will often try to 'make sense' of where the PWD may be going, it is rarely correct and often delays effective searching.

What are the most crucial characteristics of a successful search?

1. Start searching immediately.
 - a. Families should call law enforcement agencies for help before they engage in a search, and law enforcement agents must assist immediately.
 - b. It is critical to find a PWD before they enter a secluded area when they are extremely difficult to find and likely to die.
 - c. Ensure that the caregivers arrange to leave a familiar person in the home in the event of a successful return or find. Ensure that the primary caregiver can be reached by phone during the search.
2. The initial search should concentrate on a 1-mile radius of the place last seen.
 - a. All accessible areas should be searched with most areas requiring a foot search. This includes front and backyards of houses, inside easily accessible buildings, and streets/highways.
 - b. The initial search should then extend to about a 5 mile radius for the place last seen.
 - c. Searching in this manner should continue for several hours depending upon how long the PWD has been missing. After 6-8 hours from the time last seen, it will be crucial to begin to concentrate on the areas where poorer outcomes are more likely.
3. If the initial search has been thorough and the PWD is not found, it is critical to return back to the place last seen and plan an intensive search of the natural areas within a one mile radius.
 - a. This includes all woods, brush, fields, water and abandoned spaces such as cars and buildings.
 - b. Every square foot has to be visually inspected. Thus for areas with heavy brush or undergrowth, a shoulder-to-shoulder walking search must be undertaken.
 - c. PWD who die when lost will be found within 1 mile of the place last seen more than 90% of the time.
 - d. It is critical to plan the search so that every foot of natural area has been inspected visually or on foot. When the body was eventually discovered, it was almost always in an area where searchers had been but not found the individual.
 - e. If the individual is not found within 1 mile, planning for the next mile should be done and the search extended.
 - f. When the PWD becomes lost driving a vehicle:
 - 1) the typical range in which they are found is equal to the number of miles that can be traveled with the available gas. It is rare that the PWD successfully negotiates filling the gas tank alone.
 - 2) the car is often found at the side of the road in a ditch. Other common places are fields and woods where the car can be totally obscured.
 - 3) PWD who become lost driving die in a similar manner to those walking. They are almost always abandon the safety of the car and are found in a

secluded natural area within 1 mile; frequently they are found within 500 yards.

- 4) The initial search should focus on finding the car; then focus on a one mile radius of the abandoned car using the above techniques.
4. Most commonly searchers find PWD while on foot.
 - a. Helicopters may be useful particularly in cases of drowning in remote areas or when searching for abandoned cars. However, be careful not to exclude a foot search of an area in which a helicopter search did not locate anything. Frequently the PWD has so secluded themselves in brush that a visual sighting is not possible, even from a close distance.
 - b. Search dogs may be useful, but search dogs frequently have missed a PWD secluded in a natural area. Often the only successful approach to finding a PWD was an intense foot search that literally 'ran into' the individual.

Resources

Safe Return is a program of the National Alzheimer's Association to enable the safe return of persons with dementia who have become lost in the community. It is similar to a 'medic alert' program. All PWD should be registered with the program so that correct information can be obtained when someone is found. After someone is missing, the Safe Return program should be contacted in case they receive a call of someone being found. Contact your local Alzheimer's Association or Safe Return (888-572-8566) for details.

Research articles available on this topic:

Rowe, M., & Glover, J. (2001). Cognitively impaired individuals who become lost in the community: A descriptive study of Safe Return discoveries. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders*, 6, 344-352.

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Behavioral Profile of Possible Alzheimer's Disease
in Virginia." *Wilderness and Environmental Medicine*.
6:34-43.

http://www.dbs-sar.com/SAR_Research/wandering.htm