As of 2017, there were an estimated 50 million people with dementia worldwide. It is predicted that this number will increase to an estimated 75.6 million in 2030 and 135.5 million in 2050, according to Alzheimer’s Disease International.

So there’s a good chance you will encounter a customer with this disease, if you haven’t already. Or perhaps you’ve missed seeing a long-time customer and wonder why he or she is no longer coming to your business.

Many family caregivers are trying to keep their loved ones with Alzheimer’s disease or another dementia at home and living as normal a life as possible. And yet, they may become increasingly self-conscious about taking their loved ones out in public, because the symptoms of Alzheimer’s can’t always be controlled and they fear others won’t understand. That can lead to isolation and depression for individuals with dementia and their family caregivers.

This education will help you understand why it can be difficult for individuals with Alzheimer’s disease and their family caregivers to go into the community, provide insight into the disease, and offer tips to help alleviate some common behavioral issues that may arise from customers with Alzheimer’s disease.

**Participation**

Ask participants whether they have experienced any challenging situations in their business establishment involving a customer who has Alzheimer’s disease and, if so, how they handled such situations.
Purpose of Education

This education aims to help you meet the following goals of having:

• An awareness of Alzheimer’s disease and the symptoms associated with the disease.

• An understanding of the importance of maintaining the dignity and respect of a customer with Alzheimer's disease.

• Knowledge of a few of the common behavioral symptoms and triggers of persons with Alzheimer's disease, and some simple tips for helping to alleviate a situation that may otherwise escalate.

• A welcoming environment in your business for all customers, including those with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia and their family members.

What is Alzheimer’s Disease?

According to the Alzheimer's Association, Alzheimer’s is the most common type of a group of dementia illnesses. Dementia diseases typically cause problems with memory, thinking and behavior. Symptoms usually develop slowly and get worse over time, becoming severe enough to interfere with daily tasks.

Alzheimer’s Disease: What it isn’t

Before we learn more about Alzheimer’s disease, let’s discuss what it isn’t.

• Alzheimer’s disease isn’t normal forgetfulness. Almost everyone forgets things from time-to-time, such as where they left their keys. As it progresses, Alzheimer’s disease is a different type of forgetfulness. Individuals with Alzheimer’s disease don’t just forget where they placed their keys; they may forget what the keys are for or put them in odd places, like the refrigerator.

• Alzheimer’s disease isn’t a mental illness nor is it treated in the same way a mental illness would be treated. Individuals with Alzheimer’s disease have good days and bad. They could be coherent one day and confused the next. You can’t always tell individuals have Alzheimer’s disease. They can look the same as anyone else.

• Alzheimer’s disease currently isn’t a curable disease. The symptoms that can sometimes be present with Alzheimer’s disease currently can’t be “cured” with medication. Alzheimer’s is presently an incurable disease that is eventually fatal. Alzheimer’s disease is NOT contagious.

• The potential behavioral effects of Alzheimer’s disease aren’t “bad behaviors” that should be disciplined. Anyone can develop Alzheimer’s disease (a small portion of the younger population even contracts younger-onset Alzheimer’s disease). An individual with Alzheimer’s or another dementia should always be treated with dignity and respect. Those who may develop Alzheimer’s disease include former business leaders, dedicated volunteers, war heroes, your family doctor, the next-door neighbor or a relative. At least one United States President – Ronald Reagan – had Alzheimer’s disease.

Participation

Ask participants if they have ever known someone with Alzheimer’s disease and, if so, what symptoms they may have witnessed and whether the disease caused any challenges.
What are the Signs?

Every person with Alzheimer’s disease or another dementia is different, and the various potential symptoms are not always present or present in all people at the same time. Some of the common symptoms someone with Alzheimer’s disease or another dementia could exhibit include:

- Having difficulty remembering names and recent events
- Seeming disinterested or apathetic and depressed
- Having difficulty completing tasks and problem solving
- Showing poor judgment, such as forgetting to pay for an item
- Getting lost and wandering, or seeming disoriented and confused
- Withdrawing from social activities and exhibiting personality or mood changes
- Losing things and being unable to retrace steps
- Becoming frustrated or angry
- Repeating words and phrases
- Inability to follow directions or carry out tasks
- Becoming anxious or agitated, perhaps when feeling forced to make a decision
- Exhibiting sexually inappropriate behavior
- Being confused about time and place
- Having problems understanding business dealings or money transactions, or becoming confused with buying decisions
- Becoming paranoid and thinking someone is following him or her, or trying to steal
- Experiencing hallucinations and seeing people who aren’t there
- Having problems communicating
- In the later stages, having difficulty speaking and even swallowing

How do you Assist Someone who has Alzheimer’s Disease?

People with Alzheimer’s disease or another dementia are in a constant state of change, and their brains will continue to fail and worsen over time. The mounting confusion can cause a person to be nervous, unsettled, or even scared.

While there are tips for helping someone cope with the disease, communicating with an individual who has Alzheimer’s disease can be difficult because of changes in his or her thinking and that person’s inability to explain what he or she wants and needs. Also, individuals with Alzheimer’s disease often will not acknowledge or may not even understand that something might be amiss with their behavior. For example, an individual with Alzheimer’s might place an order, then immediately forget what he or she ordered.
Triggers
Everyday situations could trigger a reaction from an individual with Alzheimer’s disease including:

• Hunger, thirst or a need to use the toilet
• Boredom
• Being in an unfamiliar environment or having a change in routine
• Being in pain

Being Prepared
Here are some suggestions to help alleviate these situations:

• Remain calm
• Be patient, flexible and understanding
• Do not take things personally; the disease is typically causing the symptoms
• Keep a positive attitude
• Treat the person as you would want a loved one or yourself to be treated
• Avoid arguing with the person
• Avoid embarrassing the person
• Treat the customer with dignity and respect

How to Interact
Following are suggestions for how to interact with a customer who is exhibiting any of the symptoms above:

• Introduce yourself and greet the customer
• Politely address the customer by sir or ma’am
• Approach the customer slowly from the front
• Smile
• Speak to the person at eye level
• Speak slowly and calmly, while using short, simple words
• Use a comforting tone of voice
• Allow enough time for the client to respond
• Avoid interrupting the customer
• Limit distractions during communication
• Increase the use of gestures and other non-verbal communication techniques
• Respect their feelings
• Ensure all immediate basic needs are met
Tips to Help Neutralize a Situation

Experts have developed several strategies that have proven effective for positively interacting with individuals with Alzheimer’s disease who are exhibiting some of the behavioral symptoms mentioned. One technique may work better than others, so businesses are encouraged to try several:

Seek to understand

• If a customer becomes agitated or upset, try to find out what’s going on. Something in the immediate surroundings could be bothering him or her.

• Suggest the customer move to a different location in your business, store or restaurant. A change of scenery could be just what is needed.

Redirect

• What if a customer makes an inappropriate comment, or becomes loud and disruptive? Redirecting is one way to help change the subject or mood. It can also mean encouraging the customer to literally change direction and go from one place to another.

• For example, you could try to redirect the customer by asking him or her about a favorite food or hobby. Changing the topic may also help to establish calm.

Apologize

• What would you do if someone with Alzheimer’s starts arguing in your business? Apologizing may help to take the attention off the customer. This individual could calm down with the belief he or she was not at fault.

• For example, if the customer has become upset because a need is not being met quickly enough, apologize and redirect the individual to another topic. This may serve to calm the customer.

  Note: in this scenario, “apologizing” is akin to empathizing with the customer’s feelings (versus taking responsibility for something the business didn’t do or acknowledging fault).

Offer choices

• Offering choices may help someone with Alzheimer’s disease to feel in control. If a customer is having trouble making a decision, pose a question that includes an either/or choice.

• For instance, if a customer is having problems deciding what to order, say: “We have two wonderful specials on the menu. Would you like the meatloaf or the baked chicken?” More complex business matters might require that you suggest the individual have an advocate, such as a family member, with them to help make any decision.

Workbook/Slide

If you encounter a confused and upset individual in your business who is alone, or who appears lost or extremely agitated, and cannot give you the name and contact information of a family member or trusted friend, you should call 911.

Participation

Discuss the best ways to handle a potential situation in your business. Ask your employees for examples.
Why the Education?

Learning more about this disease, showing understanding to family caregivers, and treating individuals who have this disease with dignity and respect can help make you a leader in your community who is serving the needs of a growing population of individuals dealing with this difficult disease.

Resources

HelpforAlzheimersFamilies.com
A website providing free resources for Alzheimer’s family caregivers and an opportunity to connect with others facing a dementia illness.

ConfidencetoCare.com
A resource for family caregivers providing Alzheimer’s disease or other dementias care at home, along with a free downloadable Alzheimer’s and Other Dementias Daily Companion mobile app for iPhone and Android phones.

CaregiverStress.com®
A website for family caregivers offering a wide range of tools and topics.

USAagainstAlzheimers.org
A resource to help educate and empower public and private sectors.

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