Apple Pie is a very real depiction of the challenges faced when a parent is living at a distance. The daughter is a child who grows up to be her mother’s best friend as they navigate Alzheimer’s disease together. In this particular case study, the story takes on a Mother’s Day theme. The caregiver interview and analysis following the story illustrates many useful coping strategies that worked in this situation for this family. These care solutions may prove useful for others dealing with similar challenges:

My mother, Shirley, is 82 years old. She lives in Indiana and I live in Los Angeles. Although Mother remains vibrant and highly independent, there are moments when she has episodes of short-term memory and confusion. One rainy Sunday, Mother calls me up, “Dear, I’m baking an apple pie this morning. How many apples shall I peel?”

Now, I wondered at this, as Mother has always been an expert baker. “Well Mother, I think perhaps 6 apples should be sufficient.”

A few minutes later, the phone rings again. “This is your mother calling, dear. I’m baking an apple pie, and I am wondering how long should it remain in the oven?” I assured Mother of the approximate baking time. I was hardly surprised when the phone rang 45 minutes later. “Dear, this is your mother. Do you think the apple pie is ready to come out of the oven? It looks golden brown.”

“Mother, it smells delicious.” The aroma of cinnamon is wafting to me over the telephone.

“Good”, says Mother, “Out it comes from the oven and I’ve set two plates out. I shall slice us each a piece, dear.”

“Lovely!” said I. And Mother and I enjoyed this special moment over a piece of warm apple pie.

The above story evokes childhood memories many of us have shared with our own mother.

The interview with the daughter follows:

Do you worry about your mother living so far away?

I try not to attach worry. Mother has lived in Indiana all her life; her roots are there. Many of her friends remain living close by. I would love to have her living closer by us, but she simply will not leave her roots. And the other thing—independence has always been very important to Mother. Keeping her as independent for as long as possible outweighs the worry.
And what suggestions could you make for other families having loved ones living at a distance?

Keep in touch as best you can and just know that your loved one is alive and well. I chat with Mother just about every day. Some days, she doesn’t remember that I have called. Find out as much as you can about the local resources where your loved one is living and remain connected with these resources. And Mother has a wonderful neighbor who keeps me posted of any happenings.

Talk about some of the things you have in place for your mother to maintain her safety and independence.

As mentioned earlier, Mother’s independence is very important to her. She always has been an “in charge kind of gal” and the thought of becoming dependent frustrates her terribly. So, what I try to do is focus on Mother’s strengths, and what she still does really well. We have Mother connected to the Life Line as a safety measure, in case of emergency, or if Mother should fall, help is just a phone call away. Mother has always been prone to bladder infections. Her doctor has told her that she should drink more cranberry juice to prevent these infections. The last time I visited Mother, I verified that she had a good supply of cranberry juice and reminded her to drink the juice at least twice daily. Naturally, as soon as I leave, she forgets to drink the juice. So, what I’ve done is to advise two of Mother’s good friends of the situation. They live close by and bring Mother the cranberry juice when I cannot. It seems a little thing but it keeps Mother from becoming ill and cuts down on my worry.

Your mother seems to be an expert cook. Were you surprised by the apple pie questions?

Yes, Mother has always been a great cook. Ever since the diagnosis, I find that each day with Mother is an adventure. Each day is a new experience and I don’t know what to expect. So, when the telephone rang and Mother had questions about the apple pie, I must say I wasn’t really surprised!

How has the onset of Alzheimer’s disease changed your relationship with your mother?

It may sound strange, but this diagnosis has actually brought us closer together. There is somewhat of a role reversal. I mean I have taken over the mothering role and that’s all right with me. I mean Shirley has made so many sacrifices in her life for me. Now it’s my turn to support her. She will always be my mother and I love her dearly.

Talk about some of your other childhood memories.

I have a younger brother, Peter. At the time, I remember I was about 7 years old and Peter was 5 years old. On Saturdays, Mother would always let Peter and I take over her kitchen and bake anything we wanted. We could make as many messes as we liked. This particular Saturday, Peter and I decided we were going to bake an Angel Food Cake. I was mixing the dry ingredients in the mixing bowl while Mother was showing Peter how to separate the eggs, because in this recipe the egg whites have to be whipped. At the very moment when Mother turned her back around to the cupboard to reach something, Peter turned the Mixmaster onto the highest speed and the egg whites whipped up out of the bowl, hitting the ceiling. Peter and I both screamed. Mother looked up at the egg whites all over the ceiling, and her only comment was, “Oh, I guess this is a good time to wash the kitchen ceiling.”

Sounds like your mother has a good sense of humor.

Yes, and Mother always thought that childhood should be about building memories and having fun. She could always make us children laugh and she always injected fun into the stuff we were doing. Like the time Dad
brought home the “biggest fish”. Daddy had it all cleaned and ready for pan-frying. Mother called us for dinner when this was all ready and prepared. There in the middle of Dad’s dinner plate was this teeny-weeny sardine fish! We laughed so hard.

Even with the Alzheimer’s disease, does she still retain her sense of humor?

Absolutely!! Alzheimer’s disease has robbed Mother of her memories, not her heart. Her sense of humor is alive and well. She can no longer remember a lot of the things we did together when I was a child growing up. Although some of Mother’s brightness is vanishing, we are making new memories everyday. We still laugh a lot.

ANALYSIS

Getting Started
Maintaining a safe environment for the person with dementia and, at the same time, not compromising the individual’s independence and dignity can be one of the greatest challenges. Because of this, frustration levels can run high, both on the part of the person with dementia and their caregiver. This daughter truly believes that Shirley’s independence and control in her life by far outweighs the safety issues of moving her mother close by. Keeping her as independent for as long as possible outweighs the worry.

Adding Flavor
When families face this situation, they need to first assess what’s going on with their loved one. Independence is very important for Shirley. She always has been an “in charge kind of gal.” Knowing this, the family has connected her to the Life Line as a safety measure. In case of emergency, or if she should fall, help is just a phone call away. This daughter keeps in touch and chats with her mother just about every day. And she has found out as much as possible about the local resources where her mother is living and remains connected with these resources.

Putting It All Together
Home is a place of comfort. It is a place of safety and security. Although Shirley’s independence is very important, her daughter fears that her Mother may no longer be safe in her home. Rather than making a transition at this time, she has found out as much as possible about the local resources where her mother is living and remains connected with these resources. This daughter focuses on her mother’s strengths. And at this moment, she can still smell the cinnamon from Mother’s apple pie!

What Works:
- Focus on strengths
- Maintain independence for as long as possible
- Simplify the environment
- Remain connected with local resources

What Doesn’t Work:
- An environment that is unfamiliar
- Logical reasoning
- Overcompensating for the person

Suggested Readings:
- There’s Still A Person In There; Michael Castleman, Dolores Gallagher-Thompson, Matthew Naythons; 1999
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