

Dementia Coach Jeannine Forrest of Through the Forrest Recently Featured on Close Up Radio

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Jeannine Forrest still remembers the moment her mother looked at her in her own home and said, "I'm living in a house of strangers." At that moment, as a registered nurse, she realized she was not prepared to understand what her mother was truly experiencing. That realization became her life's work.

More than 30 years later, Forrest is a dementia coach and founder of Through the Forrest, where she works directly with family caregivers. Her approach rests on one idea: When families understand what is happening, have a plan, and feel supported, life can become less frightening and more meaningful for both the person living with dementia and the caregiver.



"We're dealing with a brain that's no longer thinking linearly or rationally at times," Forrest explains. "So we take an inside-out perspective, seeing the world through the eyes of the person living with dementia instead of trying to reorient them back into our world. We meet clients where they are."

It is also important to know that the brains of caregivers are also overwhelmed with new information and stress. This shift shapes almost everything Forrest teaches. When families feel overwhelmed, Forrest says she gives them three anchors: (1) Alter your expectations (it takes time and grace not to take new behaviors personally), (2) Adapt how you communicate, and (3) Ask for help.

"It really does take a village to support the person going forward," she shares. "If something happens to you as the primary support, what happens to your loved one?"

Forrest explains that dementia shows up differently in every person, and is much more than memory loss alone. Dementia is a syndrome and is often referred to as the "big umbrella" that includes a wide variety of underlying conditions, including injuries and diseases that shape the type of dementia, and how it initially reveals itself. For example, someone with Alzheimer's will often repeat the same question over and over again with some insight that they are not thinking correctly. Someone diagnosed with

Frontotemporal dementia may show dramatic personality and behavioral changes and yet their memory stays intact much longer with no insight at all into these changes.

Her core method for connecting, especially once words start to fail, is what she calls "Learn, listen and observe," which involves learning a little about the person's background and preferences. For example, do they talk primarily about the past or present? Do they time travel back and forth? What is their favorite sport, holiday or pet? Forrest points to tone of voice and body language as more reliable signals than the words themselves. She once worked with a client whose only remaining phrase was "you are my sunshine," and says her animated delivery, not her words, told Forrest when her questions about the client's favorite holiday were moving in the right direction.

For families looking for nonverbal ways to bring comfort, Forrest often turns to sensory experiences such as scent, touch and music. For example, a favorite lotion during a hand massage, a well loved song, a special food from childhood can all be comforting. She explains that smell in particular can surface memories that words no longer reach.

Forrest also works to reframe how caregivers see their own roles, encouraging them to move, over time, from problem solver to what she calls a "compassionate presence." She reminds families that they did not cause the condition and cannot reverse it, but they can still offer comfort, empathy and connection.

She also coaches on de-escalation, noting that all behavior has meaning both negative and



positive. People living with dementia typically do not moan, cry, kick, swear or lash out when they feel respected, safe and comfortable. When someone living with dementia becomes distressed, they're telling us something. Our job is to understand what they are trying to communicate, what their unmet needs are. Often, an underlying "trigger" can be identified.

The most common trigger for conflict is a caregiver's approach and how they show up in the room. A rushed, tired or frustrated expression registers instantly, while warmth and patience builds the trust needed before any care can begin.

In the late and final stage of dementia, Forrest helps families understand the difference between palliative care (which manages symptoms at any stage), and end-of-life or hospice care (which applies once a person is expected to live six months or less). She also guides families, along with their hospice providers, through the harder shift from a "cure" mindset to a "comfort" mindset.

After more than three decades in the field, Forrest says the myth she most wants to retire is that, "People with dementia disappear. They don't. Their abilities change, but the need for love, dignity, purpose and connection never goes away. Dementia changes the brain, not the person's worth."

About Jeannine Forrest

Jeannine Forrest is the founder of Through the Forrest, where she offers private coaching and support to help navigate everyday challenges when caring for someone living with dementia, offering practical strategies through her Dementia Coach On Call® practice. She also serves as director for the Dementia Horizons Academy through the Dementia Society of America, creating on-line programs for family and professional caregivers. Forrest has worked in dementia care and caregiver support for more than 35 years.

Close Up Radio featured Jeannine Forrest, founder of Through the Forrest, in an interview with Jim Masters on Thursday August 13th at 2pm Eastern

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For more information about Jeannine Forrest, please visit

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