

Forget-Me-Not Spotlight

I'm Still Here: A New Philosophy of Alzheimer's Care

By John Zeisel, Ph.D.

A review by Shannon Nosbisch, founder of Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness

I'm Still Here is a book for caregivers and family members that gives another perspective of how best to care for and love a person living with Alzheimer's disease. As in most books, John Zeisel discusses the symptoms and progression of Alzheimer's, but then goes on to discuss ways that caregivers/family members can help the person living with the disease to connect through visual art (whether by creating art or looking at art in a museum, etc.) and dramatic art (through music, theater, poetry, or films).

In another chapter, he discusses how the characteristics of a living space of a person living with Alzheimer's has a correlation with their symptoms. He tells you what 8 major characteristics to look for in long-term care residential settings, and that these same characteristics can be used in their own home.

Two messages that this book covers are these:

1. The skills and capacities of people living with Alzheimer's that don't diminish over time, or do so more slowly, provide windows for connection and communication.
2. Through those windows lie opportunities to establish and build new and vibrant relationships that can sustain us and them over time, supporting both care and well-being.

Dr. Zeisel says repeatedly that "A person living with Alzheimer's is first 'a person' and only then someone with a disease." Usually, an Alzheimer's diagnosis is seen as an Alzheimer's "sentence". But throughout the decade-long progress of the disease, the person is crying out, "I'm Still Here."

In this book, he discusses ways those living with Alzheimer's can use parts of their brains that still function well, feel enabled and competent and be less apathetic, agitated, anxious and aggressive.

Dr. Zeisel also talks about how relationships are changed when a loved one has Alzheimer's – that they still care for and continue to love us and we, as caregivers and family members, must have new expectations and build a new relationship. Communication plays a key role in building this new relationship and Dr. Zeisel breaks it down into five rules of communication.

Like most books about caring for a person living with Alzheimer's, Dr. Zeisel also has a chapter on taking care of yourself as a caregiver. He states, "Whether the person living with Alzheimer's is parent, spouse, sister or brother, engaging him or her in life cannot be the sole responsibility of a single person." He recommends taking advantage of the resources in your area – home health services, Meals on Wheels, Adult day care, etc.

In the chapter entitled "The Gifts of Alzheimer's", caregivers talk about gifts they have received while taking care of a loved one living with Alzheimer's. Some examples are the gift of having a sense of humor, the gift of the importance of family, the gift of life stories, the gift of going with the flow and many others.

The future is based on many present moments – moments the person experiences fully every day. His last chapter is entitled "Being in the Present Moment" and discusses how we can be "in the moment" caring for a person living with Alzheimer's. Dr. Zeisel starts this chapter with a quote from Mother Teresa – "Be happy in the moment, that's enough. Each moment is all we need, not more."

This resource is available at the Effingham Public Library, Flora Public Library, Evans Public Library, Newton Public Library, Greenup Township Public Library, Shelbyville Public Library and the Mattoon Public Library in the Forget-Me-Not Resource Center. If you do not have a library card, ask at the main desk how you can check it out.

