

Excerpt from "Love, Laughter, & Mayhem – Caregiver Survival Manual for Living with a Person with Dementia"

"I Have to Catch the Next Bus"

I was working in my office at the assisted- living facility to finish the staff schedule when Essie came to the doorway and asked: *"Excuse me, can you please tell me when the next bus stops here? I have to catch the next bus."*

"Oh, hello, Essie. Where are you off to today?"

"Why, I have to get home before my husband does. I have to get supper started."

"Well, Essie, the next bus doesn't stop here until noon, and I'll make sure I tell you when it's here so you won't miss it."

"Thank you so much!"

Off she went and I returned to my work. Five minutes later: *"Excuse me, could you please tell me when the next bus stops here? I need to catch the next bus."*

"Hi, Essie. The next bus won't be here until noon, and that's over an hour away. Why don't you find a comfortable spot on the sofa and I promise I'll tell you when it's here so you won't miss it."

"All right, thank you so much."

Off she went, and I again try to relocate my train of thought in the staff schedule. Five minutes later: *"Excuse me, but could you please tell me what time the next bus stops here? I really need to catch the next bus."*

I look up yet again to see her smiling face in my doorway and can't help but feel a bit impatient, and then I stop myself. Essie can't help that her brain is damaged and she can't remember this is the third time she's asked me the same question. If she could change I know she would, but she cannot, so I must be the one who does the changing. I must be the one who changes my attitude, my approach, and my priorities for her comfort and safety. I give her a big smile, rise from my desk and walk over to her:

"Are you anxious to get home, Essie?"

"Yes, I need to get dinner started for my husband."

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“Well, you have plenty of time since the bus won’t be here for over an hour. I promise I’ll watch out for it and tell you when it’s here.” (I tuck my hand under her arm and we begin to walk toward the activities area while I continue talking.) *“Oh, look! They’re painting beautiful pictures here! Essie, I know you have a lot of talent when it comes to painting. Why don’t you sit down here and paint for awhile until the bus arrives? I promise you won’t miss it!”*

Essie sat down with a smile and agreed to paint *“just one little picture.”* I was confident that once she got her mind off that bus and engaged it in her painting, she would completely forget about needing to get dinner ready.

In my reality, there was no bus that stopped there, but I knew if I tried to orient Essie to my reality instead of getting into her reality, it would only confuse and possibly anger her. By entering her reality with her, reassuring her that I would help, and knowing that she would forget the entire scenario, I kept her calm, reassured her, and redirected her mind elsewhere.

That little sting of impatience should serve as a warning to anyone caring for a person with dementia. When you feel it, that’s usually an indication that what you’re doing isn’t working, and you need to change your approach.

If I had taken the time to physically redirect Essie the first time she came to me, the next two interruptions would likely have been avoided. Any irritation and impatience I experienced needed to be directed at myself since I was the only party in this interaction who could effectively change the outcome.

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