

Coping With Alzheimer's

Introduction

As Harry Fuget states in *The Forgetting*, caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease "feels like you're on a constant treadmill." In this lesson, students will focus on the difficulties that arise in caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's and the coping strategies that caregivers and family members must make. This lesson may be used in any class but is specifically designed for Language Arts students to practice using emotionally descriptive words in their writing.

Grade Levels

9-12

Estimated time

2-3 class periods

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- View and discuss segments from *The Forgetting* related to the role of caregivers and the challenges they face.
- Read quotes, literary excerpts, and poems related to memory.
- Use *The Forgetting* Web site to find and list strategies for coping with a loved one's Alzheimer's and for spending time with an Alzheimer's patient.
- Write poems or journal entries describing what it might be like to care for an Alzheimer's patient, using careful word choice to describe the emotions and difficulties that tend to arise.

Materials Needed

- Computers with Internet access
- TV and VCR or DVD player or Internet access (*The Forgetting* is available online at <http://www.pbs.org/theforgetting>)
- *The Forgetting* video (To order visit [Shop PBS for Teachers](#))

Standards

National Language Arts Standards:

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
2. Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing
3. Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions
4. Gathers and uses information for research purposes

Teaching Strategy

1. Ask students to think about times when they've received particularly bad news, such as the death or illness of a beloved person or pet, a boyfriend or girlfriend ending a relationship, or news from their parents that they're moving away from their friends to a new town. Ask them to list words, phrases, and metaphors that describe the emotions they experienced and the ways they coped immediately upon receiving this information and for the next few weeks or months after they heard the bad news.
2. Briefly discuss the ways in which words, phrases, and metaphors such as the ones they've listed can be powerful "tools" in conveying emotional experiences. Ask student to choose words and expressions on their list that they feel are particularly powerful or descriptive. What makes them so strong?
3. Have students watch *The Forgetting*. As they watch, ask them to pay particular attention to how the caregivers react to their loved ones' illness and how they cope with their difficult situation. If your time is limited, select from these particularly relevant clips:
 - o 00:06:35 00:08:56 (McKenna family)
 - o 00:19:11 00:20:01 (Harry and Gladys looking through the photo album)
 - o 00:29:59 00:31:42 (woman being diagnosed with Alzheimer's; interview with her son)
 - o 00:36:27 00:47:43 (personality changes take a toll on families; support groups)
 - o 00:49:27 00:53:12 (Noonan family)
 - o 00:54:59 00:58:15 (Noonan family history of Alzheimer's)
 - o 01:10:11 01:11:31 (Harry and Gladys)
 - o 01:18:54 01:22:20 (end of life decisions)
4. After they've watched the program, discuss these questions as a class: How do family members tend to react to their loved one's Alzheimer's disease? What words would you use to describe the reactions shown in the video? What phrases come to your mind to describe what it's like to be a caregiver? Can you think of any metaphors or other comparisons to illustrate the activities, thoughts, and emotions of a caregiver?
5. Have students visit *The Forgetting* website. Visit "The Experience" and click on "First Person Stories." Read the content as well as the following quotes about memory:
 1. *The Brain is wider than the Sky*
For put them side by side
The one the other will contain
With ease and You beside
-Emily Dickinson
 2. *Do you imagine it is pleasant to be ashamed of something you can't even remember?*
-Orson Welles
 3. *Lose something every day.*
Accept the fluster
Of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing is hard to master.
Then practice losing farther, losing faster;
Places, and names and where it was you meant

To travel. None of these will bring disaster.

-Elizabeth Bishop

4. *There is no complete forgetting, even in death.*
-D.H. Lawrence
6. Pose these questions to the class, and discuss students' responses. Alternately, have students write answers to these questions as they're reading the excerpts listed above.
 - What does Emily Dickinson mean when she writes "The Brain is wider than the Sky?" How does this sentiment relate to the deterioration that Alzheimer's patient's experience?
 - Imagine that an Alzheimer's patient said the same thing that Orson Welles wrote: "Do you imagine it is pleasant to be ashamed of something you can't even remember?" What emotions is that person expressing in this question? What would it be like to have this feeling?
 - How did Emerson cope with and react to his Alzheimer's? What might have been some of the reasons for this reaction?
 - Why do you think Elizabeth Bishop wrote this poem? Do you think her attitude could bring comfort to an Alzheimer's patient? Why or why not?
 - Do you agree with D.H. Lawrence's statement that "There is no complete forgetting, even in death?" How do you think an Alzheimer's patient or caregiver might react to this statement?
7. Have students visit the "Coping" section of The Forgetting site. Ask them to look through this section and read about the recommendations for ways that people can cope with a loved one's Alzheimer's disease. Ask students to list at least six specific coping suggestions.
8. Have students link to "For Caregivers" and link to "Activity Ideas." Ask students to list at least six suggestions that are made in this section.

Assessment

Have students write poems or journal entries describing what it might be like to care for an Alzheimer's patient. They may write in the first or third person. Their writing should include the following components:

- words, phrases, and metaphors that describe the emotions the caregivers may experience during the progression of their loved one's illness
- some ways in which the caregiver might try to cope with his or her difficult situation and interact with the Alzheimer's patient

Extension Ideas

- Have students write informational brochures advising family members on how to deal with a loved one's Alzheimer's and how to help their relative with the disease. They should include some of the recommended activities from *The Forgetting* Web site.
- Discuss works of literature that deal with memory loss. Two good examples include *Gulliver's Travels* and *King Lear*. Have students read excerpts that describe the characters' memory problems (the Struldbruggs in *Gulliver's Travels* and the King himself in *King Lear*). Discuss how the characters' memory problems progress and how they affect other people. Have students write essays entitled "Memory Loss in Literature," describing how dementia is portrayed in literary works and providing examples from the works they've examined. Other authors who wrote about dementia include William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Euripides, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Anton Chekhov, Balzac, among many others. Discuss with students why they think these writers were fascinated by the subject of memory loss.

Online Resources

PBS *The Forgetting* :

<http://www.pbs.org/theforgetting/>

PBS Frontline: Pop:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/pop>

The Alzheimer Page:

<http://alzheimer.wustl.edu/Education/default.htm>

Alzheimer's: Preserving Memories:

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/invoke.cfm?objectid=8558AFB9-E11B-4E9E-9693CAE9F025A844>

ElderCare Forum:

<http://eldercare.infopop.cc/6/ubb.x>

About the Author

Betsy Hedberg is a teacher and freelance curriculum writer who has published lesson plans on a variety of subjects. She received her Secondary Teaching Credential in Social Studies from Loyola Marymount University and her Master of Arts in Geography from UCLA. In addition to curriculum writing, she presents seminars and training sessions to help teachers incorporate the Internet into their classrooms.