

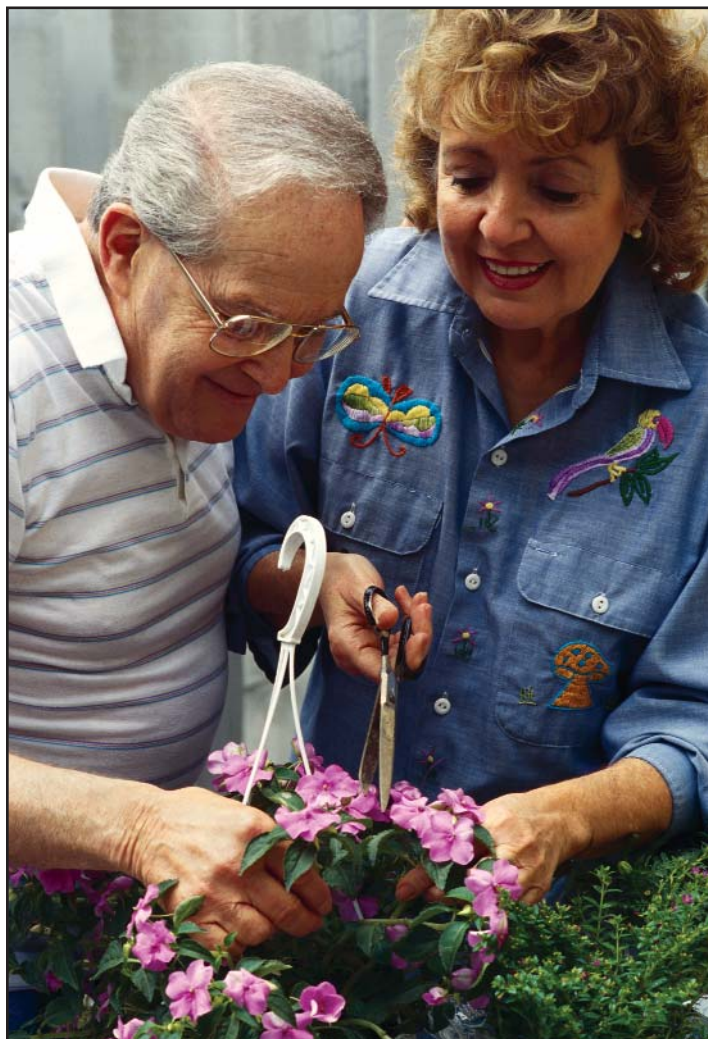


UNIVERSITY OF  
FLORIDA

IFAS EXTENSION

## Safe Return<sup>1</sup>

Meredeth A. Rowe <sup>2</sup>



## Aging in the 21st Century

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by the year 2050 the nation's elderly population will more than double to 80 million, and the more frail, over-85 population will quadruple to 18 million.

Currently, Florida ranks first in the United States in the percent of the population who is full-time and seasonal residents over the age of 65. Older Floridians, their families and communities face a myriad of issues related to aging.

*Aging in the 21st Century* is an eight-topic program that addresses issues such as:

- health and medical care
- family relationships
- economic concerns
- caregiving
- home modifications
- retirement
- nutrition and diet

Institute on Aging core faculty from the Colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Health Professions, and Liberal Arts and Sciences joined Extension faculty from IFAS as educators for this series.

1. This document is FCS2211 FY626, one of a series of publications from the distance education in-service "Aging in the 21st Century," coordinated by Carolyn Wilken, PhD, MPH, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, UF/IFAS. First published: September 2003. Reviewed by Candice King, formerly coordinator of Research Programs, Institute on Aging. University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

2. Meredith Rowe, PhD, RN, Associate Professor, University of Florida College of Nursing and University of Florida Institute on Aging, Gainesville, 32611.

## WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- **GENERAL INFORMATION:**
  - Why people with dementia become lost
  - Where they are found
  - Who most often finds them
- **PROVIDING HELP:**
  - **Caregivers:** How you can protect the person from getting lost
  - **Community Citizens:** How you can identify people who are lost and return them home safely
- **SEARCH STRATEGIES:** Learn search techniques that are most likely to help you find a person who is lost.

## THE PROBLEM

In the United States, more than 10,000 times each year, persons with dementia become lost in their own community and cannot find their way home.

In spite of what most people believe, the quality of care people receive does not influence the likelihood of people with dementia to become lost. Even people who live in the best caregiving situations can become lost in the community. It can happen to anyone, even if the person does not have a tendency to wander.

In the next pages we will take a look at why people with dementia become lost, how to prevent this from happening, and identify the best search strategies for finding someone who is lost.

## HOW AND WHY THEY BECOME LOST

The most common sign of dementia is memory loss. People who are cognitively impaired or have dementia, often do not remember their addresses, their names, directions to their home, or with whom they live.

They also lose track of time and place, and become disoriented on their own street. They may forget where they are going or how to get there.

The most common reasons why a person with dementia leaves the home or place of care include:

- **Cannot find caregiver:** Sometimes, the person leaves the home to find a caregiver who may actually be in the next room.
- **Becomes agitated:** The person might become agitated after an argument. For example, he or she might want to visit a relative who is no longer alive. When the caregiver tries to explain it is impossible, the person becomes upset and storms out of the home.
- **Caregiver is asleep**
- **Normal outing:** The person might be on a normal outing with the caregiver and suddenly become confused and wander away.
- **Left home alone**

## WHO FINDS THEM

Most of the people, who are found alive, are returned home by either a policeman or a community member who recognized symptoms of dementia.

Often, a good samaritan is the only one between a lost person found safely or found dead.

This is why the more educated the community becomes in recognizing the signs of dementia, the more likely people with dementia who are lost will be safely returned home.

## WHERE THEY ARE FOUND

Since most of those who become lost leave the house or place of care walking, they are usually found within less than 5 miles from the place they left. This is true both for those who are found alive, as for those found dead. However, the likelihood of finding a lost person alive within an urban setting is much greater than within natural areas. Urban areas include residences, hospitals, roadways and businesses such as grocery and drug stores.

In rural areas, it is common for people with dementia to hide themselves in natural areas such as woods or fields where they are less likely to be found. Wooded areas, lakes and ponds, abandoned buildings and fields provide excellent hiding places.

Natural areas where people have been found, usually dead, include:

- Bike paths
- Cactus beds
- Corn fields
- Dry riverbeds
- Wetlands
- Snowy ditches
- Construction sites

## REMEMBER:

People with dementia often hide and seclude themselves when they are lost.

They also rarely respond to their own name or look for help.

## HOW TO HELP: Information for Community Citizens

Good samaritans who are able to identify a lost person with dementia are often the best chance an individual has of returning home safely.

In this section we will address some of the warning signs a cognitively impaired person might show, as well as the most effective ways to communicate with such a person.

### WARNING SIGNS

#### Clothing

- Not enough or too much clothing for the weather

- Pajamas or pieces of night clothing on
- Very dirty or messy clothing

#### Behavior

- Unable to correctly cross a street or wandering in or on the side of a street/highway
- Acting confused in a store, such as hanging around too long or eating merchandise without paying
- Going into someone else's backyard or trying to get into someone else's house

- Sitting on the sidewalk
- Rummaging through garbage

### HOW TO COMMUNICATE

- Get the person's attention by facing them
- Ask if the person needs help
- Pay attention to answers that seem confused or do not make sense
- Keep your questions simple
- If there is any concern, call 911 and remain with the person until help arrives

## HOW TO HELP: Information for Caregivers

Prevention is the best way to avoid people under your care from becoming endangered while lost.

Below is a series of actions you can take to avoid that someone becomes lost in the community.

- Avoid leaving the person in your care at home alone. Use family and professional respite services.
- If the person leaves the home in an angry or agitated state, follow him or her to ensure a safe return.
- Stay close to the person on outings.
- Ask neighbors to notify you immediately if they see the person outside alone.
- Ensure that the person's clothing is tagged with name and contact number.

- Register with Safe Return\* and keep contact information updated.



*\*Safe return is a program of the National Alzheimer's Association to enable the safe return of persons with dementia who have become lost in the community.*

**CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ALZHEIMER'S ASSOCIATION OR SAFE RETURN (888-572-8566) FOR DETAILS.**

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to avoid the person from becoming lost.

As mentioned before, anyone who suffers from dementia is at risk of becoming lost in the community at some point. This is true regardless of the quality of care they receive or their own personality.

With this information in mind, it is critical that you develop a search plan:

- Identify people who can help you search
- Identify person who will remain by the phone during the search
- Map out search areas for all volunteers.

Later on we will discuss some searching strategies that have been successful in bringing the person home safely.



## SEARCHING STRATEGIES

As seen previously, most of the time, it is up to community members to recognize that a person with dementia needs help. People who are lost will rarely respond to their names when called or ask someone for help. The location where they go rarely makes sense. Often searchers are misled by caregivers who believe the person has gone to a specific location.

This is why the following searching strategies are critical in helping the lost person come back home safely.

### BEGIN SEARCHING IMMEDIATELY

- Call law enforcement immediately after you notice the person is gone.
- It is critical to find people before they enter a secluded area where they are likely to stay and potentially die.
- Make sure to leave someone at home in case of a successful return.

### CONCENTRATE THE SEARCH NEARBY

- Begin a thorough foot search within a one mile radius from the place where the person left.

- This search should include front and backyards of houses and inside easily accessible buildings.
- If the initial search fails, extend it to a five mile radius
- If you still cannot find the person, go back and plan an intensive one-mile-radius search of natural areas.
- This search should include woods, brush, fields, water and abandoned buildings and cars.
- During this search, every square foot must be visually inspected. A shoulder to shoulder search is critical.
- If this intensive one-mile-radius search is unsuccessful, increase the area one mile at a time.

### IF PERSON IS DRIVING

- If the person left in a car, the typical range of travel is equal to the number of miles that can be travelled with the available gas. Focus the search within one mile of the abandoned car.

### REMEMBER

- Helicopters and search dogs may be useful, but most people are found during an intensive foot search.

### PUBLICATIONS IN THIS SERIES:

- *The Future of Aging is Florida*  
Jeffrey Dwyer, PhD
- *Designing Educational Programs for Older Adults*  
Carolyn Wilken, PhD, MPH
- *Financial Issues*  
Jo Turner, PhD, CFP
- *Elder Nutrition*  
Linda Bobroff, PhD, RD, LD/N
- *Fall Prevention*  
Kristen Smith, MPH
- *Family Relationships in an Aging Society*  
Terry Mills, PhD
- *Adapting the Home*  
Pat Dasler, MA, OTR/L
- *Safe Return*  
Meredeth Rowe, PhD, RN

*Aging in the 21st Century* is co-sponsored by the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; and the College of Medicine's Institute on Aging. It is supported by a grant from the Associate Provost for Distance, Continuing and Executive Education, Dr. William Riffe.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on:

- how to identify a person with dementia that might be lost,
- how to avoid your loved one from becoming lost, or
- more detailed searching strategies.

Visit [www.alzonline.org](http://www.alzonline.org) and look for *Florida Injury Prevention Programs for Seniors* (FLIPS) under [Resource Center](#).

