

Alzheimer's Dementia Accusations and Fractured Fairy Tales

The natural tendency for most Alzheimer's caregivers is to try and explain, and sometimes in a heated fashion, that we did not do what we are being accused of by a dementia patient.

By Bob DeMarco Alzheimer's Reading Room

From <http://www.alzheimersreadingroom.com/2016/04/alzheimers-dementia-caregiving-accusations-fractured-fairy-tales.html>

It is not unusual for Alzheimer's and dementia patients to make false accusations.

For example, **it is not uncommon for dementia patients to say someone is stealing money from them.** It is also fairly common for women living with Alzheimer's to guard their purse. Even to take it to bed with them at night.

It is one thing when a dementia patient accuses someone else of stealing, and totally different when **they accuse you**, the primary caregiver of stealing.

Somehow we don't get as upset when someone other than ourselves is being accused. However, when we are being falsely accused **we have a need to defend ourselves, and our reputation.**

Have you ever been falsely accused by someone suffering from Alzheimer's? Join the club. It does happen to most of us.

The natural tendency for all of us is to try and **explain, and sometimes in a heated fashion, that we did not do what we are being accused of by the dementia patient.**

So we go on and on defending ourselves, and trying to correct the patient. Does this strategy work effectively? Or does it make matters worse? Let me try. **It makes matters worse.**

When a person living with dementia believes something to be true it is true, and nothing you can do will convince them otherwise¹.

If it is unlikely that you can convince them otherwise, why do we, the caregiver, continue to try and convince them otherwise over and over? Are you good at convincing a person with dementia that they are wrong, and it never happened?

Let's talk about my mother's dolls.

For years my mother would accuse someone, not me, of stealing her dolls. I knew that no one stole her dolls, and in fact I knew what did happen, she gave them away. I admit

for the longest time I tried to explain to her that the dolls were not stolen; and that, in fact she gave them away.

Did this defuse the situation? No, in fact it made her more unhappy, more confused, and harder to deal with. This usually resulted in us having another rotten day.

I started trying to figure out where these accusations were coming from. I gave this considerable thought - for about 2 years. Here is what I concluded.

It seemed to me that Dotty would look over to the place where her dolls had been (lets say about ten years ago). She didn't see her dolls. She didn't remember she gave them away. So she had to make sense of the situation.

She didn't see them. They weren't where they were supposed to be. She didn't give them away. So she came to the only logical conclusion possible.

Someone stole her dolls.

Finally I realized her conclusions made perfect sense for a person living with Alzheimer's. In Alzheimer's World.

I began to deal with the problem of accusation by thinking of my mother's brain as being "fractured" by dementia.

She remembered the dolls, so that piece of information was still rolling around in her brain (long term memory). She knew where she kept the dolls, so that piece of information was rolling around in her brain (long term memory). However, she couldn't see or find the dolls, so there was only one logical conclusion - they were stolen (short term, lack of new memory). How she decided who stole them really was a matter of **trust**. She accused the person she trusted the least of stealing them.

I began to think of her accusations as fractured fairy tales (think Rocky and Bullwinkle).

Thinking of her accusations as fairy tales made them a lot easier to accept that it was when I was thinking of them as - accusations. This was especially true when I was the one being accused.

Thinking of myself as a character in a fractured fairy tale was much easier to digest and accept. After all, all I really was in these fairy tales was a cartoon character of sorts.

Some of my mother's wildest and craziest fractured fairy tales now seem very funny to me. They were not so funny when they first occurred however. They usually made me feel angry.

Here is one fractured fairy tale my mother told for over 4 years. She claimed that my brother came for Christmas. He came in and somehow I made him mad, so he turned around and went right back home. **It was all my fault that he left.**

Consider this. My brother lives in Philadelphia, and we live in Delray Beach, Florida. Does it seem plausible that he took an airplane flight 1250 miles, walked in the door, got mad, then turned around and took a plane right back home?

Every single person my mother told that story too over a four year period **believed it**. In fact they asked me, what did you do to make your brother so angry that he went right back home?

Fractured fairy tale? Of course.

What actually did happen was my mother talked to my brother on the telephone on Christmas day. Later all she could remember was that she talked to him. It seemed to allude her that she talked to him on the phone.

So. If she talked to him (in person) and he wasn't there, he must have gone back home. Why did he go home? Well the only logical conclusion she could come to is that I must have done something to make him leave. So, I was mean to him and he left. No, she didn't blame herself, she didn't blame him, and yes she did blame me. **I became the villain** in this particularly fractured fairy tale.

Alzheimer's patients are really good at piecing together these fractured fairly tales.

If you take the time to examine all the pieces of a tale you will soon notice that all the pieces come from a particular place, time, or memory. They take a piece of memory from one time and place, another piece of memory from another time and place, and then they add in the accusation which makes all the different pieces logical and understandable. They need to add the accusation because there is no other way for them to make sense of the story. **Don't take it personally. They are doing the best them can with a memory that is fractured.**

The part I liked best about my mother's most vivid fractured fairy tales was that they were always more believable than that truth. **Dotty was one great fractured fairy tale story teller.**

People old and new always believed her fractured fairy tales. After a bit, I started relaxing, looked at the face of the person she was telling the story too, watched as they became all amazed and often animated.

I guess you could say, the joke was no longer on me or my relatives.

So I learned to accept Dotty's accusations as fractured fairy tales. Tall tales that were fascinating in their component parts. Little pieces of information that were rolling around in her brain all molded together to make sense, and then used as the basis for the sometimes ugly accusation.

Alzheimer's Dementia Patients Have Wonderful Imaginations

I don't think it is well understood that persons living with Alzheimer's have wonderful imaginations. If they tell stories they have an imagination, don't they?

By Bob DeMarco Alzheimer's Reading Room

From <http://www.alzheimersreadingroom.com/2014/05/alzheimers-dementia-patients-have.html>

Did your loved one living with dementia ever tell you a story that was less than true?

I don't think it is well understood that persons living with Alzheimer's have wonderful imaginations. I mean if they tell stories true or not, **don't they have an imagination?**

My mother was always telling **stories loosely based on fact(s)**.

For example, for at least four years she told this one. She told everyone who would listen that my brother had come to see us from Philadelphia for Christmas. But, he didn't like what he saw, or variation, Bobby said something he didn't like, and he went back home.

Everyone that my mother told this story too - **believed it**. And, they wanted me to explain what happened.

Now, **how believable is a story** that would have meant my brother flew 1200 miles from Philadelphia to Delray Beach, got himself into a tizzy, and **turned right around and went back home?**

The factual basis of this story? My brother called and talked to my mother on the phone on Christmas day.

What did my mother remember? She talked to my brother. She couldn't remember that is was on the phone, so he must have been their in person.

The **first 50 times** my mother told this story **it incensed and hurt me**. Keep in mind, **I am the antagonist in this story**. What did I do, I got **angry** and **immediately corrected her**.

However, along the rode in my caregiver journey I started thinking about her wild and wacky tales.

It soon dawned on me that **the stories were often based on one or two facts**, and then she made the rest up to turn it into a story. I started referring to them as **Fractured Fairy tales**.

These stories seemed to be coming from different memory parts of her brain, or what seemed to me to be like her **fractured brain**.

One time, she weaved together a fascinating story for a young person she had never met before. At the age of 92, she told him **she had never taken a medication** for anything in her life. Never. Not true of course. She took Aricept and Namenda to name two of six.

She told the young man, "**I am a healthy old broad.**"

I might add **she was quite proud of this**. We happened to be at the Banana Boat at the time when this story took place.

Dotty then went on to tell him she worked at the Banana Boat for ten years (not true), she did the book keeping (this was true, only the job was at Boca West).

She just went on about the job and people, etc (more Boca West). Meanwhile, **the young man is smiling, and raving about the story. He was really having a good time, and so was Dotty**. She was just going and going. I just stood there watching and listening and to be honest, **I was fascinated and happy as a lark at Willow Grove Park**.

To be perfectly honest, in the beginning I would have cut her off near the start of the story, corrected her, and told the listener it was not true. But over time, I learned these **Fractured Fairy tales were really really good**, and most importantly, **Dotty was using her brain**.

It was often fun identifying the components of the story that were true, and the parts that were made up (or sometimes true, but used out of context). Dotty always had new and different stories if she met a new person. She also had a bunch of **recurring stories that were anywhere from me getting me ready to pull my hair out, to really really funny**.

I had to hear for 4 years about how she had hired a lawyer to get her license back, or how she found out who had her license taking away, or how she got her license back and she was going to start driving again.

It took a long time for me to stop pulling my hair out on the driving and license stories, which probably explains why I have less hair now then I did ten years ago.

The stories about getting her yellow Volkswagen Beetle fixed were pretty good. Of course, no one had seen the yellow VW for 25 years. It no longer existed. She never actually told me this story directly. She mostly told it to Joanne and Ruth. I learned to laugh and smile at this one.

Hey, at least she remembered her 1976 Beetle. In fact, every time she saw a modern day Beetle on the road she said she was going to get one, or that was her favorite car. Fractured Fairy tale explained.

I admit persons living with dementia often make up stories that put us the caregivers in a very bad light.

And yes, just like everyone else, for a time, these stories made me angry. But then, I came up with a solution that worked for both of us, Dotty and me. I just **started putting my arm around her, gave her the head hug, said something nice and positive, and puff the dark clouds blew away.**

Dotty and I **both ended up happy and smiling** almost every single time.

You do get to choose you know.

You can try and explain to a person living with dementia why **what they are saying is not true**. Of course, this only **confuses** the person living with dementia and makes things worse. You end up having a bad hair day, and they end **helping you** have the bad hair day.

How does your **heart and stomach feel** right after you try and explain something to person living with dementia?

So choose. Keep trying to change Alzheimer's World into some other place; or, **use the head hug.**

Start listening to these Fractured Fairy tales **more closely**. Soon you will get the hang of **recognizing the real basis of the story**. Sometimes a person living with dementia **needs something** but they don't know how to tell you.

Or better yet, **they let you know what is still sticking around in their brain.** What **they like, or would like, or need.**

Try to get in the habit of letting those dementia imaginations run wild. Wanna know what happens next?

They might start telling you stories from the past that are true. **Maybe even true stories that you never heard before.** It happened to me many times.

Okay, let me ask you. True or False, persons living with dementia have wonderful imaginations? Must be something going on in there, don't cha think?