

Autonomy vs. Safety in Dementia Care: A Delicate Balance

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Introduction

One of the greatest challenges families face after a loved one is diagnosed with dementia is balancing independence with safety. Many caregivers find themselves asking difficult questions...

- Should Dad still be driving?
- Is Mom safe living alone?
- Should I stop her from doing this?
- Am I taking away too much independence?

These decisions are rarely black and white. Every person living with dementia deserves dignity, choice, and purpose. At the same time, caregivers have a responsibility to help prevent harm. Finding the balance between autonomy and safety is not about choosing one over the other—it's about finding ways to support both whenever possible.

Understanding Autonomy

Autonomy is a person's ability to make choices about their own life. It reflects independence and control over daily decisions.



For individuals living with dementia, autonomy may include:

- Choosing what to wear
- Deciding what activities to participate in
- Selecting foods they enjoy
- Maintaining routines and hobbies
- Expressing preferences and opinions

Even as cognitive abilities change, the need for autonomy remains. Research consistently shows that preserving choice and independence can improve quality of life, reduce distress, and support a person's sense of identity.

When individuals lose opportunities to make decisions, they may experience frustration, depression, anxiety, or a loss of self-worth.

Why Safety Matters

As dementia progresses, changes in memory, judgment, problem-solving, and awareness can increase risk.

Common safety concerns include:

- Falls
- Medication errors
- Wandering/becoming lost
- Cooking accidents
- Financial exploitation
- Unsafe driving
- Difficulty recognizing unsafe situations

Family members often find themselves stepping in to protect their loved one from these dangers. While safety interventions are usually motivated by love and concern, they can sometimes feel restrictive or even controlling to the person living with dementia.

The Tension Between Autonomy and Safety

Many caregivers feel caught between two competing priorities:

- **If I allow independence, what if something happens?**
- **If I prioritize safety, am I taking away too much freedom?**

The truth is that life has always involved risk. Dementia does not eliminate a person's right to make choices simply because those choices carry some level of risk.

The goal should not be to eliminate all risk. Instead, caregivers can strive to manage risks while preserving as much independence as possible.

This approach is sometimes called **"dignity of risk."**

What Is Dignity of Risk?

The dignity of risk recognizes that every person has the right to make choices—even imperfect ones—and that taking reasonable risks is part of living a meaningful life.

For example:

- A resident may choose to walk independently despite a risk of falling
- Someone may still want to cook, even though supervision is needed.
- A person may want to help fold laundry despite making mistakes.

While these activities may involve some risk, they also provide purpose, enjoyment, and a sense of accomplishment.

When we remove all risk, we may unintentionally remove many of the experiences that make life feel worth living.

The truth is that life has always involved risk. Dementia does not eliminate a person's right to make choices simply because those choices carry some level of risk.

Practical Strategies for Balancing Safety and Independence

1. Focus on Abilities, Not Limitations

Instead of asking, "What can they no longer do?" ask:

"What can they still do successfully? Even with support?"

A person may no longer be able to prepare an entire meal independently, but they may still enjoy stirring ingredients, setting the table, or helping with other meal tasks.

2. Modify the Environment

Often, safety can be improved without removing independence.

Examples include:

- Installing grab bars when needed
- Improving lighting
- Using medication reminders
- Removing tripping hazards
- Utilizing GPS devices when appropriate
- Simplifying household layouts

3. Offer Choices

When possible, provide opportunities for decision-making.

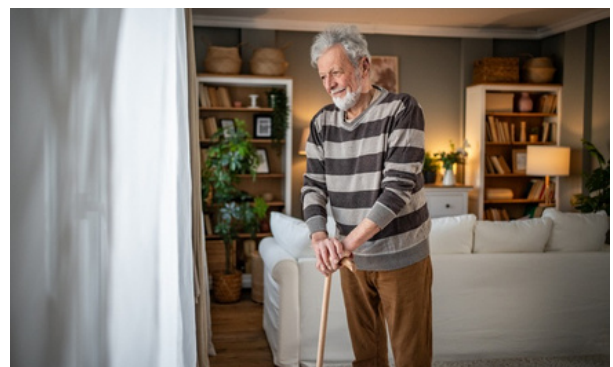
Instead of:

"What do you want to wear?"

Try:

"Would you like the blue shirt or the green shirt today?"

Offering manageable choices supports autonomy while reducing frustration.



4. Understand the Person's Values

Every individual has different priorities. Some people value independence above all else. Others prioritize security and support.

Consider:

- What has always been important to them?
- What activities bring them joy?
- What risks would they have accepted before dementia?

Understanding these values can guide care decisions.

5. Evaluate Risks Thoughtfully

Not every risk requires the same response.

Ask:

- How likely is harm?
- How severe could the harm potentially be?
- Can the risk be reduced rather than eliminated?
- What would be lost if the activity were restricted?

This helps caregivers make balanced decisions rather than reacting out of fear alone.

When Safety Must Take Priority

There are situations where the risk of serious harm becomes too great to ignore.

Examples may include:

- Driving when judgment is impaired
- Repeated wandering into unsafe environments
- Inability to manage medications safely
- Significant fall risk without awareness of limitations
- Unsafe use of appliances or other equipment

In these circumstances, caregivers may need to implement restrictions to protect the individual's well-being.

Communication Matters

How we approach conversations can significantly impact how a person responds.

Rather than saying:

"You can't do that anymore."

Consider:

"Let's find a way to do this safely together."

Dementia impacts a person's ability to see the situation logically. This conversation shift acknowledges the person's desire for independence while emphasizing partnership. When autonomy and safety seem to conflict, a person-centered approach asks: "What solution best supports both this person's well-being and their quality of life?"

Conclusion

Balancing autonomy and safety in dementia care is one of the most difficult responsibilities families face. There is rarely a perfect answer, and decisions often evolve as the disease progresses.

The goal is not to eliminate every risk or preserve every independence indefinitely. Rather, it is to help individuals live with dignity, purpose, and as much choice as possible while protecting them from significant harm.

Because at the heart of dementia care is a simple truth: people living with dementia still need opportunities to make choices, experience joy, and remain connected to who they are.

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