

You Solve the Case

Hand to Mouth

A woman with advanced dementia lives in the home of her extended family, and has begun trying to eat all of her food with her hands. What should the family members do?

Who is this person? What was she like before she had dementia? Was she very careful and neat when she ate, or not?

Making use of abilities that remain. Can she answer questions? Can she speak? Can she read? If so, can she follow printed directions? Can she use a template (if so, can she use a template for a table setting, with outlines of where knife and fork and spoon should go)? Can she name utensils? Can she drink with a straw? Can she imitate if you demonstrate how to use utensils?

Gather the evidence. Does she have arthritis (does it hurt to use utensils)? Can she hold utensils that are designed to assist persons with arthritis? Does she grimace when she holds utensils? When did this behavior begin? Was its onset gradual or sudden? Will she use a spoon for soup? Will she use a tea spoon to stir tea before she drinks it? Does she try to eat liquids or nonsolid foods with her hands, too? What happens when you give her a spoon or a fork?

Use the formula. Is there undiagnosed pain (is it less painful to eat with her hands than to use utensils)? Can she recognize utensils? Is she rushing to finish the meal so that she can leave the table (is the dining situation over- or under-stimulating)? Does she seem upset when she is eating? Can she follow verbal directions (like "Show me how you use a fork.")?

Solution. The solution will depend on the cause. I have seen the use of a template to give guidance as to where to put the fork or knife when it is not being held help persons like this, both in the U.S. and in Europe. If a template does not help, and you have tried everything else, can she be sustained with finger food? (If she can keep up a good diet with finger food and liquids she can drink, as with a straw, let her eat that way. (Who's problem is it?)

CLUE: The older woman can hold things.