

The Alzheimer's Podcast: Navigating Rough Terrain with The Dementia Sherpa
[Episode 113: The Train Went to the Wrong Place](#)

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Christy: *You're listening to The Alzheimer's Podcast with Christy Turner of Dementia Sherpa, where we're all about bringing the Good Stuff --that's respect, kindness, love, empathy, and compassion--for people living with dementia, their families, and the professionals who support them.*

I'm Christy Turner, AKA The Dementia Sherpa. I've enjoyed the privilege of working with over 1,500 people living with dementia and their families so far, including multiple experiences in my own family. In the course of my career, I've transformed from total train wreck on my first day as a professional to local go-to expert, speaker, trainer, and consultant. And if I can go from scared spitless to confident care partner, I promise you can, too.

Christy: *Phil, I was in a meeting yesterday and I got a text from you that got my attention, for sure. Do you want to talk about that?*

Phil: Sure, of course. Of course. I may get emotional, but that's okay. Oh, you want me to say what happens?

Christy: *Yeah.*

Phil: So, it's a bit of a long, complicated story, but the short gist of it is that I was all proud of myself 'cause I took a train into Philadelphia instead of driving. And everything was going really well until I was on my way home and I somehow ended up at the wrong station. I missed my station, or so I thought. And I got off

at the next station and thought that I would just hop the next train back, not a big deal.

But when the next train arrived, it was a completely different line. And a very annoyed and impatient conductor told me that the only way to get back to my station was to go all the way back into Philadelphia and get on another train coming back to the 'burbs...and, all I could think about was, *How in the world did the train get to the wrong station?*

And I was flipping out about it. And I finally--I mean, looking at the maps, and it doesn't make any sense to me. *How did this train get to the station? What am I doing here?*

And I finally called Tim and obviously he could tell I was two steps away from a panic attack. And he very quickly said, "Just stay put. I'll come get you." Our house is about 40 minutes away from that station. And he did.

And...it's interesting: you never--even after somebody told me that I probably got on the wrong train and that's why I was at that station, my brain couldn't accept it. All I could think about was, *How did that train get to the wrong station?*

Trains aren't supposed to do that. Trains stay on the tracks and they go on their little ways. And I went to bed that night desperately trying to figure out how that could have happened.

Woke up, same thing: *How could that could've happened?* And like an hour later, I was like, "Oh, shit! I must've been on the wrong train."

But, I mean, this is now 16 hours later? 16 hours of torturing myself, of, *How in the world could that train have gone to the wrong station?*

And then, of course, once I realized what my brain had done to me, I got very upset and sat at my computer and cried a lot because...it just didn't make any sense to me. It just doesn't make any sense to me. It still doesn't make any sense to me. I mean, how I could have been so stubbornly insistent on the idea that the train went to the wrong place, not me. The train went to the wrong place.

Christy: Do you think maybe you were caught up in the moment, discombobulated, realizing, "Whoops, I'm in the wrong place. Okay, I have a solution. I'll get on the train going the other way and get off on my correct stop,"? Then the interaction you had with the conductor--do you think all of that, maybe that combination, could have created a heightened emotional state where it was, it became, an

insurmountable obstacle to look at it from many other direction, because you were more focused on just solving the immediate problem?

Phil: Yes. I was panicking, and panicking never leads to clear thought. The idea that I was panicking is also kind of silly: I was only 40 minutes from home. It wasn't like I was in a different time zone or anything. Although I felt like I was in a different reality for a very long time.

But that doesn't--yes, I was clearly discombobulated and upset and not thinking clearly at the moment. But, what I don't understand is how, for 16 hours, my brain never let me consider the idea that I was on the wrong train. Even after somebody said to me, "Oh, I get on the wrong train all the time, don't beat yourself up about it." I didn't even understand what she was talking about.

Christy: *Hmm.*

Phil: And then like, out of nowhere, literally I'm just sitting in the kitchen and I'm like, *Oh, wrong train. That makes sense. I was the one that was in the wrong place. The train wasn't the one in the wrong place. The train was going where it should have been going.*

Christy: *Uh-huh.*

Phil: But, how could it have taken *that* long to figure that out?

Christy: *Well, we're Monday morning quarterbacking it now...or Tuesday morning, when the episode comes out. We're Tuesday morning quarterbacking it now.*

So, one thing that you didn't say, 'cause I know it was a friend who said that to you in a text, like, "Oh, that happens to me all the time," which is something I know you don't love.

But the other thing I'm wondering is, did you talk to Tim about that? Because, what I'm wondering is, since we're Monday morning quarterbacking it, what do you think might have happened if Tim had said, for example, and I'm using Tim

because he was the one who picked you up, right, and was there in the aftermath of that, “Well, do you think it's possible you got on the wrong train?”

Do you think you would've maybe been receptive to that? Like, hearing it introduced in a different kind of a way? Not like in a, “Oh yeah, that happens to me all the time too,” but in a, “Do you think this thing is a possibility?” kind of a way?

Phil: Impossible to know.

Christy: *Mm hmm.*

Phil: I was in very deep denial, so I don't know. I mean, probably what was happening was I was in such panic, and so stuck on this idea that this train somehow jumped the tracks and went to a different line, that probably nothing would have gotten through, I'm guessing.

Christy: *That's really important feedback, and it kind of goes back to what we were talking about, I think it was [episode 109](#) or 110, I don't remember off the top of my head...but we were talking about the--well it was 109. It was The Randy Rainbow Debacle, and how the other person interacting with you insisting, “No, this is what happened” is not a helpful response to it, to the situation at hand.*

And also we were talking about your emotional response, and whoever the person is with you responding more to the emotion that's being expressed. And how this is applicable to our listeners and how they interact with their person, is really focusing on what the emotion is rather than trying to do what comes to us so naturally as care partners.

Which is, “Let me double down on reason and logic, because if I keep saying it however many times, or if I say it louder, or if I slice and dice the words in different ways, if I draw a schematic, you're eventually going to get it.”

And what you've told us in two different incidences now is, “No, not really.” It's an emotional thing in that moment and coming at you with reason and logic doesn't have any effect. Or at least not a positive effect.

Phil: Right. Do you remember, I asked you while we were texting yesterday, did you, “Did it occur to you that I possibly got on the wrong train?”

Christy: *Mm hmm.*

Phil: And you said yes, but you didn't say it to me.

Christy: *Right.*

Phil: Why didn't you say it to me?

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Christy: *Well, this goes back to exactly what we were talking about in episode 109, when you didn't recall going to the Randy Rainbow show and the friend you were with said, “Yeah [you did go]” and started producing evidence and, “Here's what happened.” And I said that wouldn't have been my response.*

My response would have been, “Oh, what a bummer.” Because that was the point of the story you were telling. To me, that was the point of the story you were

telling. You were just saying, “I didn't get to go to this thing that I really wanted to do because logistically it was just impossible and I would have been really excited to do this thing.”

And so what I heard in that story was the disappointment of life, of not being able to do a thing that you wanted to do and what a bummer.

And when you texted me and were telling me what happened [about the train], what I heard was, “I was having a great day and feeling very much like myself.

“And it had echoes of my life when I was working a high power job and going to meetings and I was doing strategic thinking and I felt like I was contributing and I tried this new way of travel and it worked out really well. And there were a couple of little bumps in the road, but I figured out how to get past them. And then this thing happened that scared the hell out of me and made me panicky and it felt like it put a black cloud over my day.”

That's what I was hearing out of it. And so to me, the response to that was, “Oh, my gosh, I'm so sorry that happened to you. I'm glad to hear you're safe right now.”

And the other thing that really stuck out to me was, I thought you showed some great problem-solving skills because you realized, “I'm in the wrong place. Here's what I need to do to fix it.”

Then you encountered someone who was quite unkind. You could feel [that] you were starting to feel even worse. You knew what was coming, and so you knew that your best bet was to call Tim.

So I mentioned that to you too. Like, “Hey, you know, you handled it really well.” I didn't see what benefit or value there would be to me saying, “You know, I think you probably got on the wrong train,” because to me, no kidding, you were in the wrong place. You know, you knew that. You knew you were in the wrong place.

That was the problem. That was what was creating the problem and the feelings that you were having. So that was the thing to be solved. Not like, “Let's reverse engineer,” and we're having, of course the broader conversation about it right now, but I just didn't see where, in any way, it would be helpful or reassuring or affirming to say that to you at that time. So that's why I didn't say it.

Phil: Yeah. And the only reason I asked you that was because when the light bulb went off, it just felt so obvious that that's what I had done.

Christy: *Yeah. You know, it wasn't one of those things where, as the story was unfolding, I wasn't like, "Oh, he got on the wrong train," because I didn't know. I didn't have all the details. I didn't know yet.*

As you told the whole story, then I was like, "Oh yeah, you got on the wrong train. That's probably what happened." But again, I'm not sure where that was relevant that it was, you know, air quotes obvious to me.

And I think, relating that to my own experiences, there was this one time when I was 20 and I married someone. Could I have asked everyone in my family, "Was it immediately obvious to you that was a bad idea?"

They all would have said yes, but how's that helpful? Right after the fact, there was the day when it became obvious to me it was a bad idea, and then I fixed the situation.

But do you know what I'm saying? It's like how is that helpful? It can become like a piling on. If it's a different kind of a thing where--and maybe this is where your question is coming from now--you know, again, relating to my own experience where it was like, "I don't want to get myself into that type of situation again, so I would appreciate it if you would share with me, "How did you know, so that I can learn from your perspective?"

That's really a different thing, right, if I'm seeking to avoid doing something. But in that moment, it just comes across as mean, 'cause it kind of is.

Phil: Mm hmm. Mean, but somebody trying to be helpful. I mean, you know...

Christy: *No, no, it's not helpful. I mean, yeah, as far as your friend texting, saying, "Oh yeah, that happens to me all the time," I think that was very much an attempt to be helpful and empathetic and compassionate. Absolutely.*

Phil: Right. "Don't beat yourself up." Right.

Christy: *Absolutely. Yeah. And as you said to me, cause I said something similar to you, as far as the “please be kind to yourself,” and you're like, “No, that's not me. I don't do it. I'm not great at that.”*

And you know, we all have our moments where the people around us can see maybe we're being too hard on ourselves, but for whatever reason, in that moment we need to feel what we're feeling and then let it pass.

I was listening to a podcast this morning and I wrote this quote down 'cause I thought it was great. It was about this sports agent who's obviously been through a bazillion negotiations.

And the question was along the lines of, “What do you do when things get really highly emotional during a negotiation?”

And he said, “it's really important to remember that emotions always fade. You can come back to whatever it is later.”

And I thought, Wow, that is great life advice. I've got to write that down. And it's true, they do always fade. So, you know, revisit something later. But we've got to feel what we feel in the moment.

Phil: So, why did it take 16 hours of truly, truly, truly believing that train was in the wrong place before that light bulb went off? And that seems excessive. I mean, I can understand in the moment of being confused, scared, panicked, you know, blah blah blah blah. And then having your brain being addled...but for 16 hours?

Christy: *Well, can I point out that part of that 16 hours, you were asleep?*

Phil: Yeah.

Christy: *'Cause you know...Drama King! So, let's shear the number down a little bit there. And sleep was a very good thing for you, so that's good.*

But you know, my theory would be--and again, I know you hate this and I'm sorry, but I think lots of people can relate to something like this, in the sense that something happened.

Oh, and can I point this out because they--and I'll link to this in the show notes--you wrote for your Memory Well column, you wrote about this, and, I, being your friend got a sneak preview. Thank you, I feel very special.

So I got a little extra detail out of that that I'm going to mention right now. And so what it was, after you came out of your meetings, you felt good about the time that you had to grab a snack and get on the train. Like, you were checking the time: "I got this."

So you were not completely focused on, "Am I making sure I am getting on the correct train?" There was some distraction before you got on the train.

So that's one piece that, again, many of us can relate to this type of experience. And so you're, I think your emotional state from feeling really great about how the day had been going and the day you were having to, the shock of, "Whoops, I'm in the wrong place. Okay, problem-solving mode. Okay."

Then interaction with a very unkind person, which helped ratchet up any feelings of panic that we're beginning to blossom. And then it was so--it was just like kind of this total disconnect.

And our brains are always going to come up with answers to the questions we ask, which is why it's important we ask good questions, right? You don't want to ask yourself, "Why am I such a loser?" A better question would be, "How can I be the best me I can be?" or something like that.

But anyway, so there was a lot of emotion attached to the experience and then that can go in many different directions and the immediacy of solving the problem and then waiting for Tim and the rumination. And so there's just all this stuff going on.

And I think the emotion had to pass. Like, you had to wait for it to fade. You needed to feel what you needed to feel and allow it to fade.

And then, even if the day had gone perfectly, Phil, based on experiences you've shared in the past about your trip to speak in Wilmington, or going to Ethan's graduation in Ohio, I think, or like travel to the cruise and back--travel days take something out of you.

You feel it physically, you end up sleeping more than you typically would after a day like that. So you were already headed in that direction of being depleted. So it was like this perfect storm of all of these things happening and then the next morning you were like, “Ugh, yeah,” tap to your forehead. “Oh, yeah. Okay. That's what happened. That's pretty obvious to me now.”

But you were also in a completely different physical and emotional state when that clicked for you. So that's why I think the lag time in it clicking.

Phil: You know, I didn't mention a couple of things in my piece that I probably should have.

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Christy: Okay, so there were some details you were holding out on?

Phil: So when I got to Jefferson Station, which is where, in Center City, Philadelphia, it was kind of confusing and chaotic. It's a big station. And there were all these helpful people wearing volunteer vests, like, "Can we help you?"

So I asked when the next train to Yardley left. And the person called somebody else over. The other person looked at the board and said 3:20, or 2:20, or whatever. And I was like, "Oh, okay."

*And I had like eight minutes at that point. You know, there was something in my mind that said, *See, that doesn't sound right because that's not what I thought I read on the schedule, but that's what they said. So I'll get on the train.**

Christy: Mmm.

Phil: And I did. And, of course, I did mention that I did talk to, when I got to Trenton, I asked a ticket agent, "When's the next train back to Yardley?" And they told me, you know, 20 minutes.

*And I was like, *Okay*, so, you know, I was getting bad information everywhere. And it was really unhelpful, you know, amazingly challenging. And I think my lesson learned there is don't trust anyone; verify, verify, verify.*

Like, I should've gone to the conductor before I got on that train and said, "Does this train stop at Yardley?" And he would've said no. That would have saved me a lot of grief and chaos.

*But you know, so I think I do recognize my limitations in some ways. Like, you know, I mentioned getting off the train and getting out of the station and putting the address in my phone, GPSing the walk and you know, trying to figure out, *Okay-- --'cause it always is a challenge when you start a GPS. Alright, well I'm here. Which way do I turn?**

Christy: Exactly, I always guess wrong.

Phil: I always go the wrong way. Always, always, always. And--but this time I asked somebody. *Yay, good Phil, I asked!* And he pointed me in the right direction, blah, blah, blah.

But I, I just think I need to be doubly careful, given my limitations. And not trust anybody, which is kind of weird. I mean...sad.

Christy: *I feel like that might be the wrong lesson coming out of this.*

Phil: Well, not trust...I mean not, not trust *anybody* but you know, verify.

Christy: *Verify as always good, for sure. For sure.*

Phil: Because, I did do the right thing. I asked, right?

Christy: *You did.*

Phil: You know, I didn't just sit there and stare at the board going, "I can't figure this out." I asked, and I was given wrong information. Twice. Not just once, but twice.

Christy: *What about if you had gone into reporter mode? So you'd asked, and they gave you the information, and then you asked a follow up, like, "Are you sure?"*

Phil: Well...

Christy: *Or, "Oh, I thought it was x, y, z."*

Phil: Well, I didn't realize, I mean...

Christy: *You didn't realize you needed to be a reporter right then.*

Phil: No, I didn't realize that, you know, it really didn't occur to me that... 'cause those schedules are so hard to read anyway. You know, it's one of those complicated, especially when you're looking at it on the phone. I didn't have a hard copy of the schedule, you know, looking at those things on the phone is next to impossible.

So, you know, it just, you know, *Oh, I read the schedule wrong. Okay.* Right? That's my immediate instinct. Which... understandable, right? Because they're difficult to read. So...

Christy: *Yeah, you couldn't know what you didn't know. I mean, nobody thought it was going to turn out this way.*

Phil: Right, there's this person wearing a vest saying, "Can I help you?"

Christy: *"Yes. I'd like some accurate help, please." You don't think you need to throw that in, right?*

Phil: Yes. "Can you really tell me what the true answer is?"

Christy: *Okay, number one, do you have future meetings in Philadelphia?*

Phil: Yes, I will.

Christy: *Okay. Number two, would you use the train again?*

Phil: Yes.

Christy: *Number three, what would you do differently, if anything?*

Phil: Have a printed schedule...highlighted.

Christy: *Mm hmm. I love that idea. I think, printed schedule, that's great.*

Phil: Before I get on a train, I'm going to ask the conductor, "Is this going to where I need to go?" And pay attention to stations as we're going. Instead of like, you know, delving into Facebook feeds and you know, at least looking for *one* station, make sure I'm on the right train...you know, because, you know when I said I missed my station, I didn't miss my station.

Christy: *It just never showed up...*

Phil: I missed my line, because it was at the right station; I wasn't on the right line.

Christy: *So, does that go back, though, to your working years, when you were commuting so much every day, where you get on a train and you're used to that being productive time?*

Phil: Oh, yeah.

Christy: Yeah. So that, that might be a really hard sell to your own brain. Like, “Oh, I'm on the train. I should just look out the window.” No.

Phil: No. Oh, and the other thing that happened was there was a crying baby on the train heading back. So I got my headset out, started listening to music, which meant I didn't even hear the conductor saying the stations.

Not that I would've necessarily known that I was on the long line, 'cause it was the first time I had done this. But, yeah, I mean, I think...with time, I'm feeling better about it. I'm still...I mean, yesterday when I was crying, it was, again, for loss of...loss of self, loss of identity, loss of feeling that I could do things.

But you know, with a little bit of time and retail therapy... I highly recommend retail therapy. Just the best thing in the world. Just get the hell away from where you are and focus on something else.

You know, in some ways, now I feel a little bit stronger about it, 'cause I now know what I really need to do. Trust, don't trust, verify, you know, go right to the source. Go to the conductor. Don't ask the person with the nice little vest on who is a volunteer and probably had no clue what they were talking about.

You know, it's funny, it just occurred to me, the first person who--I wrote this little Facebook thing as I was waiting for Tim, about this alternate reality that I felt like I had dropped into, in the *Twilight Zone*, where the train went to the wrong place.

And the first person who responded, it was an old college friend, actually, somebody used to work at the college newspaper, and she said, “Oh, typical day on SEPTA. Things like that, you know, it's common.” So that reinforced my belief that SEPTA did this; I didn't do it.

Christy: So that may have contributed to the time lag.

Phil: Possibly.

Christy: Yeah.

Phil: It just, you know, in a scientific sort of way, it just fascinates me that I was so set and determined that *I* didn't make the mistake, SEPTA made the mistake.

Christy: *Well, bless your heart, Phil, because you know, we have a public official who chronically says things that are demonstrably untrue, and yet there's somewhere around 42% of Americans who believe whatever that person says, versus any evidence to the contrary.*

So again, I know you hate these examples, but truly you are not having a unique experience in your brain screwing with you, as far as, like, this episode goes, right?

This particular incident where there is a, air quotes, logical conclusion, and your brain is like, "Nah, that's not it. Couldn't be that, rule that out. It's gotta be this other thing that is more implausible," because it has something to do with how humans work, right?

When we're talking about 40% of our population who does exactly the same thing, like, "Nah, I can't be as simple as drawing a straight line from A to B. It's gotta be this more convoluted thing that involves a Q." But I agree with you. I think it's fascinating.

Phil: And it really does--you know, going back to what you said. God, it would not have made any sense for Tim to sit there and fight with me.

Christy: *Mm hmm.*

Phil: It would have ended unhappily for everybody.

Christy: *Right.*

Phil: And that, I think, is a really important lesson for caregivers and friends and people, you know...let us live in our reality.

Christy: *And that's our show. Thank you so very much for listening. Head on over to the show notes at DementiaSherpa.com. And if you feel like you need to clone yourself to get it all done for your person, be sure to visit our sponsor, Home Instead Senior Care-[East Portland](#) and [Clackamas County](#), and let them know that The Dementia Sherpa sent you.*