

When a Loved One Has Dementia

By Julie Cargill, R.N., Adult Nurse Practitioner, Geriatric Nurse Practitioner, Retired

This topic, with our aging population, is an issue which is commonly part of our everyday lives. There are an estimated 50 million people in the world with dementia; about 10 million new cases yearly. As many as 50% of people over 80 have some form of dementia.

There are different causes for dementia, the most common being Alzheimer's. The predominant symptoms are impaired memory, learning, and communication ability. I have a sister with advanced dementia. She has been my best friend, frequent travel partner, and family support coordinator up until her decline starting maybe 10 years ago. She still holds me in high regard, but has forgotten everything we have done together in the past 60 years. Our history is gone. It really hurts to see her without her prior personality; the one I know.

We ask the question: what can we do to prevent this condition, or stop it once it starts. The simple and present answer is: nothing that we know of, although research with new developments is on-going. There is one category of medications that is thought to be helpful in early stages, to help stabilize and slow the process. However, once the process of dementia has been identified, the interventions available are primarily confined to palliative and supportive.

Here are some steps to consider in this process, that you might facilitate in your own home or a friend or other family member's home:

- 1. *Facilitate acceptance of the diagnosis.*** Be aware that there may be much hesitancy to accept the prospect of dementia; understanding and acceptance takes time. Discussion with the medical care provider available to the individual may include topics such as medications to consider, and eventually, home health or appropriate placement options in advanced stages.

Planning for assistance with in home maintenance is many times helpful. The chief provider for the individual may benefit from open discussions, depending on their level of acceptance. Support organizations are available in most communities.

Local facilities such as Margaret T. Morris Center and Susan J. Rheem Center and other local facilities are designed for care options in advancing dementia.

- 2. *Learn about Dementia.*** Finding out about this process can give the involved household members an ability to plan for eventual means of support. These are two websites to access for information: <https://www.alzfdn.org> and Dementia.com. The latter site provides webpages and articles regarding symptoms and causes of dementia, and helpful coping interventions. The National Alzheimer's Association leads the way in attempting to end Alzheimer's and all other dementias by accelerating global research,

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driving risk reduction and early detection, and maximizing quality care and support. You can access this site for Arizona at <https://www.alz.org/dsw>.

3. *Maintain a calm and acceptive atmosphere.* With an identification of memory problems, the person may feel anxious, stressed, depressed, suspicious and/or delusional. Agitation and mood swings may be present. Support for the individual and their immediate family is imperative. Try to keep your interactions similar to the past experiences they have had with you. Patience and acceptance are important responses to maintain.

It may be necessary to deal with refusal of medications, decline of hygiene behaviors, resistance to healthy exercise patterns, and other issues. It may be necessary to repeat similar recommendations to them frequently, or answer the same question multiple times. The same simple instruction or answer repeated many times may be necessary and helpful.

Confrontation will generally exacerbate the problem. Local Alzheimer's support groups can help the responsible caregiver learn helpful ways to maximize health status. These places are local resources for help in Prescott:

Cognitive Assessment and Support Clinic
Dignity Health, Yavapai Regional Medical Group
802 Ainsworth Drive, Suite B
Prescott, Arizona 86301
(928) 775-5567

Alzheimer's and Dementia Care
Dignity Health, Yavapai Regional Medical Group
802 Ainsworth Drive, Suite B
Prescott, Arizona 86301
(928) 327-5504

4. *Develop strategies to promote safety and health maintenance.* The individual may demonstrate difficulties with gait and balance as well as distorted reasoning and judgement. Ascertain the needed supervision and the need for assistive devices. A home health referral for an assessment of recommended household adjustments can be ordered by the primary health care provider.

5. *Normalize activities of daily living.* Social or recreational activities may still be helpful and appreciated: e.g., going out to eat, taking a walk as able, gardening, looking at

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magazines, playing a card or board game. Participating with them can help maintain connection. Maintain a consistent routine of waking, napping, mealtimes, and bedtime.

Recognize that this situation is unfortunately quite common, and many of us have similar family situations. Feel welcome to openly discuss your situation, and participate in comradeship and support for one another. Last week's Epistle contained an important message from our interim rector, Rev. Susan Schubert: "Remember that you are not alone. Countless others have walked this same journey." The church is here for us all with spiritual support and comradeship.

References

1. "Dementia." The World Health Organization, *WHO.int*. Last Updated September 21st, 2020. Accessed July 12th, 2021. Link: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/dementia>
<https://www.alz.org/dsw>
2. <https://www.webmd.com/alzheimers/types-dementia>
- 3 Rev. Susan Schubert; Interim Rector, St. Luke's Prescott; St. Luke's weekly Epistle.