

What about dementia?



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What is it anyway?

By Julie Cheney, RN

A lot of people will say something like, "My uncle had Alzheimer's, but it wasn't dementia." It's a common misconception that these terms are unrelated. Alzheimer's disease (not Old Timers'!) is a form of disease in the brain that leads to changes in brain tissue resulting in the person being unable to function in their usual way. Dementia is an umbrella term to cover such brain changes caused by many different things, over 200 causes!

Dementia, no matter what causes it, is currently not curable. It is a chronic illness that causes usually slow deterioration. Different causes or types of dementia have some variations as to the ways it is manifested or the rapidity of onset and deterioration. Although there is not a cure, yet, there are many treatments, strategies and actions people can take to reduce risks, improve functions and generally manage many aspects of the ways an individual's dementia manifests far more effectively than was possible even ten years ago.

The most important thing we can do as a society, whether we are close to someone with dementia or not, is to see them as a person first. People who have dementia do not lose humanity, only some of their functions, similar to any chronic illness.

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What about dementia?

What can be prevented?

Like all of life, there are no guaranteed ways to wholly prevent anything, let alone dementia. However, there are ways to reduce your risks, and then, if you have been diagnosed with dementia, improve your life's chances and experiences. These ideas, based on Dementia Australia's many supportive Information pages, are just a brief overview of what you can do to set yourself up for the best odds on your brain health.

1. Heart health – a healthy heart makes for better brain health. This is all the usuals; nutrition, exercise, check-ups, treatments where necessary.
2. Physical activity – keeps blood pumping, immunity functioning, provides stimulation. It doesn't have to be two hours in the gym, walking is ideal (and cheap).
3. Brain work – challenging your brain to learn, make new connections, find old connections in new ways, recognise new things. Same old, same old does not create stimulation. Stimulation is like brain food.
4. Diet, again with the diet! – Good foods make things work, bad foods make it harder for your body. Sugar, alcohol, poor dietary balance, limited water intake all make it harder for your body to do anything.
5. Social life – activities that are based on social interaction keep you part of a changing, human world, and allow you to be who you are in relation to others. See others, speak to others, be around others, be part of something.

“People who are living with dementia are people first, chronic illness second.”



What about dementia?

What's it like on the inside?

There are many misconceptions about living with dementia from it being contagious, to being 'happily demented' or 'intractably violent', and even that the person is a child again.

A person who is going through the changes of dementia can be confused about why things don't work like they once did. The way we move through life has so many unconscious functions that we have not considered in detail for a long time, like going to a shop. Such an activity requires you to know many things and to be able to put a thousand brain functions together every second you are on your journey.

With the shop example: where do I live, where is the shop, what is the route to the shop and back home, what do I want at the shop, how do I pay for things, do I pay for all things, how do trolleys move, how do I move, what are all the noises, why do I buy these things, what is that I am buying, am I going anywhere next, why is it so bright, have I been here already this week, how do I speak with these people and what are the words in this context, and ever present, who am I in this world?

It takes a lot of brain energy to do all that computing. Imagine if you were going through those questions each time you did something, how exhausting it could be, how frustrating. Imagine how frightening it could be. Not understanding how to do such simple things can prove frightening and highly frustrating.

The unknown, the variations between individuals, projecting long into the future before looking at right now, not making adjustments as they become necessary all make it harder to learn to live with the changes of dementia. The first step is to respect the person, what's on their inside and to be adaptable to the changing situation.



At Later Years Support

We endeavor to provide useful, practical ways to support people in their later years, and their families. We utilise current evidence where possible, reputable health related sources and decades of experience with older people to guide our information. We offer suggestions that are general in nature and do not attempt to cover all needs of all people, or to be considered the only advice sought for a person's concerns. We recommend everyone seeks professional advice in any circumstance of complex health and wellbeing concerns.

A checklist for basic strategies

<input type="checkbox"/>	Try to simplify life with less clutter and easy environments, but not at the expense of all purposeful activities and meaningful things for the individual.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Be clear about what is hard to do and what is necessary to adjust so that both the person and those around them know what they can do to be helpful, without taking everything away.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't expect that the concept of time means the same: day, night, hours, tomorrow may be concepts that don't make sense anymore. Try dealing in the now, not planning too far ahead, and being energetic at times that work for the person. E.g. active in the day without long snoozes to reduce 'sundowning' with high energy activity in the evenings.
<input type="checkbox"/>	If it's hard to recognise things by spoken words, use alternatives like pictures or even written word signs to mark important parts of the home, e.g. toilets, rubbish bin.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoid boredom by having activities, music, walks and purposeful functions that are achievable, spread through the day.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Keep numbers of choices to a minimum, and where the answers can be simple. E.g. yes/no questions or 2 options to choose from rather than a long list.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Face the person when speaking to allow all the functions of communication to be 'read' as you speak, and keep it clear, not overly complex, allowing time to understand what is said and expected of them.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider what is a stimulant which could be influencing activity and responses and distress, caffeine, sugar, bright lights, noise, crowds.

IN SUMMARY

1. Dementia is an umbrella term for many causes of brain changes.
2. General health management can help to reduce risks.
3. Everyday tasks have many micro-tasks within them which can cause difficulties.
4. Respect the person as they are and as they were and be prepared to adjust.
5. Recognise the need to take on strategies to simplify life and avoid over stimulation.

References:

<https://www.dementia.org.au/about-dementia/i-am-a-carer-family-member-or-friend/>

And <https://www.maturetimes.co.uk/living-dementia-personal-story/>