

Understanding Dementia

Imagine being lost, not knowing where you are, what day it is, who these “strange” people are, or perhaps not knowing where your wife or husband went. Dementia can rob you of many things we normally take for granted. To better understand dementia, this article will discuss:

- What is dementia?
- What are the common symptoms?
- What is the cause?
- Can it be cured?
- How does it progress?
- What is helpful to those afflicted?
- What is detrimental to them?

(Since a greater number of those with dementia are female, we will refer to the person with dementia as she/her).

Dementia is caused by loss of or damage to nerve cells and the way they connect in the brain. The most common type is Alzheimer’s disease. It may also be associated with other conditions such as Parkinson’s disease. Five to eight percent of people over the age of 65 have dementia.

Symptoms of dementia may include memory loss, getting lost in familiar places, crying easily, talking less, and outbursts of anger.

Depending on the type of dementia, there can be an increased familial risk.

Dementia progresses from normal behavior to very severe behavior, at which time people no longer recognize close family or friends. During this time, she may wander, hoard (food for instance) and become more and more forgetful. It is not unusual to display aggression caused by being embarrassed, fearful, and frustrated.

Continued on next page.

What are some things that are helpful to your loved one and can make them happier and calmer?

1. Visit often but keep visits brief. Although she may not remember the details of time spent together she will often take away how you made her feel.
2. Share a favorite activity:
 - a. Fix jigsaw puzzles
 - b. Look at photo albums. (Be prepared to answer: “Who is that?”)
3. Read a favorite book, especially if her eyesight is poor.
4. Color a picture with her.
5. Listen to soothing music.
6. Reassure her.
7. Maintain a routine.
8. If permitted, bring a pet. This will usually evoke a smile and it has a calming effect.
9. Touch is very important and will often calm and reassure her.
10. If she seems frustrated at being unable to remember an event, it is helpful to admit that it was quite some time ago. Tell her you can hardly remember it yourself, excusing the embarrassment of not remembering.
11. It’s not unheard of for someone with dementia to want a “baby”. A doll to cuddle will comfort her and she may enjoy showing her “baby” to others. NEVER ridicule her any more than you would laugh at someone’s child for doing this.
12. A proper diet is important as is regular physical activity.

There are also things you should not do to people with dementia.

1. Never say “I just told you”. If you need to repeat, act as if you are telling her for the first time.
2. Don’t tell her that she is wrong. If she insists that a deceased sister is coming to visit, don’t argue. Simply say, “How nice, shall we go for a walk until she’s here?” Soon she will have forgotten it.
3. Don’t ask her “Do you remember (a name, a place, or an incident)?” This will only remind her that her memory is failing.
4. Don’t ask “Do you know who I am?” Just tell her who you are. It may be helpful to tell her who your parents are/were.
5. Don’t bring up upsetting topics.
6. Don’t ask her what she wants to eat. Simply say “We are having meatloaf (for instance). It looks delicious.”
7. If she accuses you of never visiting, don’t argue. Just say “I’ll try to come more often.”
8. Don’t treat anyone with dementia disrespectfully! This “unlovely” person used to be a colleague, professor, teacher, or a loving parent. Don’t laugh at them! Laugh with them!



Although dementia takes away much of what people normally enjoy, understanding what people with dementia are feeling is very beneficial. Treating a loved one with dementia as considered above will help both you and her and can even make this period of her life very enjoyable and memorable for both of you.


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