

Alzheimer's not caused by aging

The other day I read an article that contained the statement, "The single biggest cause of Alzheimer's Disease is aging." This is absolutely wrong, and it represents a logical fallacy that we see all too often in conversations about Alzheimer's disease.

The nature of this logical fallacy is to confuse *coincidence* with *cause and effect*. Coincidence, by definition, is, "a striking occurrence of two or more events at one time apparently by mere chance." When we jump to the conclusion that one caused the other, we have taken an illogical leap that can lead to misunderstandings and even harmful decisions.

Claiming that Alzheimer's is caused by aging creates unnecessary fear in our aging population. Yes, Alzheimer's is "age related," but it is not caused by the aging process. It is a specific, identifiable disease of the brain that some will get, but many will not, no matter how old they become. The great majority of us will live out our lives without contracting Alzheimer's Disease.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, one in ten Americans over the age of 65 will get Alzheimer's. This means that 90 percent of people over the age of 65 will not have Alzheimer's, which is a commanding majority.

Alzheimer's, we have believed for some time, is caused by "plaques" and "tangles" in the brain that interfere with neuro-connections that are basic to the brain's function. However, we have learned that these abnormalities alone may not cause cognitive decline or the other symptoms associated with dementia.

Many of us have the plaques and tangles years before any sign of dementia, and we have also found that there are people in the Alzheimer's "age range;" 65 and older, who have the plaques and tangles but no symptoms of the disease.

So, what sets off the disease that results in the atrophy and devastation of the brain? We don't yet know. While the plaques and tangles may be a precursor condition, they alone do not appear to be the cause.

I feel that too often our beliefs about Alzheimer's are based on fear and opinion rather than logic and facts, and this can be very counterproductive to focusing on what we can do in the here-and-now. Teepa Snow, the dementia practitioner I study under, says, "Until there is a cure, there's

care!"This should be the focal point that directs our energy to helping others and achieving the things we can achieve.

I prefer to leave the discussion of cause and cure to the scientists who are qualified for the task. In the meantime, we can try provide the resources, teach the techniques of effective care, and promote the philosophy of compassionate care that can help people now; not is some distant future when we actually have a cure.

We all hope to see that day, but until then we have a lot of work to do to keep our loved ones safe and social with the dignity that provides them the best quality of life we possibly can. And the last thing we should be doing is telling the people living in their senior years that aging is going to give them Alzheimer's!

Debbie Selsavage is a Certified Trainer and Consultant in the Positive Approach to Care®, and a Certified Dementia Practitioner. Her company, Coping with Dementia LLC, is dedicated to making life better for individuals living with dementia. Contact Debbie at deb@coping.today to learn about free support groups on line.