

The possible signs of dementia

One of the most common misunderstandings about Alzheimer's and other causes of dementia is that it involves only memory loss. Memory loss is a key and conspicuous symptom, but dementia causes many other physiological and neurological changes that can result in dysfunctional behavior.

First, let me offer a reassurance that forgetting things does not mean you have dementia. It happens to all of us. "Where are my keys?" "Where did I leave my coat?" "Oh gosh, I'm so embarrassed; I can't remember this guy's name?" Relax, you very likely don't have a problem.

An individual with abnormal memory loss will begin to repeat him or herself, often asking questions you have just recently answered. Short term memory is affected first. A person with dementia may recall events from the past, but not remember what they did an hour ago. Eventually, even long-term memory will be affected.

Having trouble with familiar and once easy tasks can be an indicator of dementia. For example, managing money, remembering medications, or driving safely are examples. This can result from both cognitive and physical problem. For example, motor skills will decline and a person with dementia may find it difficult to button a shirt or tie his shoes.

Forgetting common words or miss-naming things can suggest encroaching dementia. Did you see the movie "Still Alice?" Suddenly, Alice was unable to remember the word "lexicon," which described the very core of her profession as a PhD Professor.

Confusion as to time and place can be a symptom. This, combined with degraded judgment and motor skills, is why it is so dangerous for a person with dementia to continue to drive or have access to firearms.

Degraded judgment can include not thinking things through, or jumping to unwarranted conclusions. This can include paranoia. Remember our talking about losing your keys? A normal person will begin to mentally retrace his steps in a logical process. A person with dementia may immediately jump to the conclusion that someone has stolen his keys.

Again, on the subject of the keys, a person with dementia will begin to place things in odd and unusual places. They may begin to hoard and create hiding places where they tuck things away.

Noticeable changes in personality, mood, and behavior can indicate dementia. This may be exhibited in a loss of initiative when the person with dementia loses interest in the things he has enjoyed. Someone with dementia may show fear, frustration, and anger on an uncharacteristic level.

Because dementia is progressive, irreversible, and incurable, it has become the most feared malady of our time. If you or a loved one exhibits some of the behaviors described above, A) Don't panic and jump to conclusions, and B) Don't withdraw into denial. These extreme and opposite reactions are not helpful.

First, be aware that some of these symptoms can be caused by detectable and curable problems. For example, thyroid gland malfunction and uterine tract infection can result in dementia-like behaviors. These are relatively easy problems to deal with.

This is why the proper reaction to concerns about abnormal behaviors and loss of memory is screening and diagnosis as early as possible. You may be able to rule out dementia. Finding out your problem is not dementia but something simple and curable will give you and your family immeasurable peace of mind.

And, if screening results in a diagnosis of dementia, it is good to know early because there are medications that can benefit quality of life during the progress of the disease.

Fortunately, in Citrus County, screening is available at no charge. The non-profit Memory Enhancement Center provides this service. If you have concerns about yourself or a loved one, call 352-746-0125.

If you have questions, please e-mail me at deb@coping.today. I'll answer you personally and, if appropriate, share these answers with others through this column.

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