

Dementia

AND ITS MANY DIFFERENT FORMS

Neighborly Home Care in Delaware County knows that few topics are more uncomfortable to consider or discuss than the potential of a person losing their mental faculties due to age, injury, illness, or a combination of factors. Unfortunately, the situation outlined is a reality for millions of Americans.

Estimates vary considerably, but most believe that between 20-40% of all people over age 65 are suffering from some form of progressive mental handicapping.

The blanket term for this is dementia. According to the Alzheimer's Foundation, "Dementia is a general term that describes a group of symptoms- such as loss of memory, judgment, language, complex motor skills, and other intellectual function- caused by the permanent damage or death of the brain's nerve cells, or neurons."

As home care providers in Delaware County, we have created this guide to help those with aging loved ones be aware of what dementia is and how to be prepared in the event that the disorder does appear.

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The Many Potential Causes of Dementia

1. Disease

The best-known cause of dementia is disease, and several distinct illnesses have been found to lead to dementia.

Alzheimer's: The most famous and most common cause of dementia, Alzheimer's involves clumps and tangles of proteins forming throughout the brain, inhibiting normal operation.

Frontotemporal dementia (FTD): FTD involves the frontal lobe of a person's brain degenerating, affecting cognition, personality, and social behavior.

Lewy Body Dementia (LBD): LBD involves round protein structures actively displacing brain cells. LBD is a relatively new classification, distinct from Alzheimer's. Researchers are unsure about many aspects of LBD.

Vascular dementia: Generally caused by strokes, this form of dementia occurs due to a lack of blood flow throughout the brain. Unlike dementia caused by other problems, vascular dementia can be halted if the underlying cause of the vascular problems are resolved.

2. Head Trauma

Dementia can be brought on by physical factors as well. As recent studies into head trauma among athletes in professional sports -such as football and boxing- have shown, repeated head trauma and resulting concussions can lead to long-term brain damage. However, in some cases, such trauma can be reversible, particularly if the person ceases the dangerous activity.

3. Genetics

Some people are simply more susceptible to dementia caused by disease than others. Alzheimer's, Lewy Body, and more have all been shown to have genetic links.

4. Other Causes

Since the brain is complex and vulnerable, many other factors can contribute. Some include: poisons, vitamin deficiencies, medicinal interactions, and nutritional disorders, as well as being contributed-to by substance abuse such as cigarette smoking and alcoholism.

Recognizing the Warning Signs

As part of our work providing elderly care in Bryn Mawr, we at Neighborly Home Care believe that people increasingly have the need for better understanding the causes and signs of dementia. Those with aging relatives should know what to watch for, and how to deal with dementia if the problem occurs.



Common Indicators of Dementia

Short-Term Memory Loss

Memory loss is often the most obvious sign of dementia and therefore one of the first that we notice in a person. Some long-term memory is often unaffected, but someone with dementia will have increasing problems remembering everyday matters like why they entered a room, or where they were driving to. Sometimes they also have problems learning new things because they are unable to retain the information.

Difficulty Communicating

Those with dementia will often have a loss of language skills, particularly a difficulty remembering the right words for what they want to say. In some cases, their vocabulary and word use may regress and they may have trouble understanding what is being said to them.

Mood Shifts

Shifting moods are common with dementia. In some cases, there may be a marked change in personality: becoming depressive, or childishly impetuous, for example. Dementia can cause fearfulness and confusion to occur, followed by impatience or anger directed at nearby friends or family.

Difficulty with Everyday Tasks

Balancing a budget, doing the laundry, or performing other aspects of an everyday routine can become very difficult for those with dementia. To be clear, we are referring to cognitive inability to accomplish such tasks rather than actual physical issues.

Recognizing the Warning Signs (cont.)

Inability to Adapt to Change

Dementia often leads to mental inflexibility, and an inability to deal with new circumstances. One major sign of dementia in its early stages is a sudden desire to have fixed routines, and the onset of stress or confusion if those routines are interrupted.

Providers of Elderly Care in Bryn Mawr Advise: Seek Help When Needed

Some mental acuity loss is normal for people as they age. The difference between dementia and simple aging is severity. Dementia causes a loss of skills that directly and progressively reduce the ability of persons to take care of themselves day to day. These changes can cause fearfulness, worry and frustration for those undergoing them. Seek help to give them the support they need.

Advance Planning for Home Care, Medical and Legal Issues



One of the most uncomfortable topics when discussing dementia in a loved one is planning for various medical and legal eventualities. In theory, just about anyone - even those in good mental health- should do some thinking about end-of-life issues. However, for someone showing signs of dementia, the issue becomes more critical. Their ability to make these decisions will degrade day-to-day, so the sooner such issues can be resolved, the better.

Understanding the Need for Planning

Many seniors may be resistant to engaging in medical and legal planning, particularly if they are still trying to fully accept their growing dementia. Generalizing scenarios is impossible, but a good approach is to frame the issue in terms of making life easier for both them and their family and giving them the power to make choices.

Even if seniors foresee many years ahead before the dementia truly disables them, taking care of major questions early can prevent a lot of hardship later.

End-of-Life Medical Issues

The medical questions to address are straightforward, and can be boiled down to some simple but tough questions:

- Where would they prefer to spend their final years, such as at a residential facility or receiving home care?
- How aggressive should medical treatments be?
- How much quality-of-life would they trade for extra months or years? Do they wish to enact a living will?
- Do they have any religious or spiritual beliefs which are important to consider?

Advance Planning for Home Care, Medical and Legal Issues (cont.)

When possible, these questions should be addressed in consultation with a doctor or medical lawyer, as some - such as living wills - may require documentation.

Legal Issues

Legal planning mostly revolves around basic estate issues. Individuals should have a full inventory of their assets done, and should have an up-to-date will. In many cases, wishes for the handling of their final months/days or medical requests may need to be put in legal documentation as well.

Probably the most important decision is designating a family member with Power-of-Attorney. That is, giving a family member full authority to make decisions on the senior's behalf in the event he/she becomes incapacitated and unable to answer for themselves. The selected person would then become the point of contact for doctors, as an example, to decide and approve medical treatments.

Communicating with Loved Ones Who Are Experiencing Dementia

For many who have loved ones with dementia, one of the most painful and difficult issues is simply the matter of communication. How do you talk to them? How can you be sure you are being understood? And most importantly, how do you help them feel like they still have a voice and a say in their lives? Main Line Senior home care provider, Neighborly Home Care offers advice.



Communication is a complicated issue for anyone providing senior home care, whether professionally or as a member of the family. Best practices can vary a lot, because each case of dementia is unique and everyone is affected by dementia a little differently.

However, if you are providing senior home care for a loved one with mental challenges, we have some suggestions to make communication easier and less frustrating for everyone involved.

Tips for Communicating with Those Who Have Dementia

- First and foremost, remember that these patients still have thoughts and opinions of their own, even if they may have trouble expressing them.
- Use a respectful tone of voice. Avoid talking down to them, or speaking as you would to a child.
- Maintain eye contact, which shows respect as well as helps them focus. Avoid excluding them from conversations, or talking about them when they are in the room without seeking their input.
- Have conversations in quiet rooms with a minimum of distractions.
- Face patients head-on, and always introduce yourself before initiating a conversation. Even if they know you, they may have trouble recognizing you at first.
- Ask "closed" yes and no questions, rather than "open" questions. For example, "Would you like coffee or tea?" rather than "What would you like to drink?"

Communicating with Loved Ones Who Are Experiencing Dementia (cont.)

- Encourage nonverbal communication, such as pointing, if they are having trouble finding the right words.
- Explore different communication styles. A dementia patient with trouble speaking might be able to type or hand-write messages more effectively.
- Pause between sentences or phrases to give them time to digest and respond. Try silently counting to five before speaking again.
- Avoid criticizing or correcting them, if you understand their meaning.
- Always remain calm and positive - avoid appearing angry or frustrated.
- Listen to the emotional content of their responses. Often, the most important aspect is that they know their feelings are being respected.
- Sometimes, what truly matters is just being present for them. When having communication troubles, simply share space, and provide emotional support with your company.

Family Meetings and Elderly Care Support

Elderly care in Delaware County can sometimes be difficult, but perhaps never more so when dementia is a factor. Dementia creates significant hurdles to overcome, from recognizing the warning signs, to properly planning for the progress of the disease, to communicating with loved ones suffering from dementia.



This chapter will address specifically how the family can provide support, through meetings and gatherings.

Providing Better Elderly Care to Seniors with Dementia Through Family Meetings

1. When to hold meetings.

A family member may have many reasons to hold a family meeting regarding dementia. Just a few of these include:

- Discussing the latest reports from the healthcare provider.
- Conferring about day-to-day care needs and the effectiveness of current treatments.
- Talking about financial concerns.
- Creating to-do lists of necessary actions.
- Future planning for such issues as estate-related decisions.
- Providing emotional support and discussions about the disease and its effects on the family.

Whatever the topic, even if the subject is difficult to talk about, such meetings are the best way to cover them, while giving everyone a voice. Ignoring problems relating to dementia will only make things worse.

2. Who should attend?

Attendance will vary from family to family, depending on who is closest to and/or most involved in the elderly care. However, one person who should always be included is the dementia patient. Failure to include the individual can cause depression or anger in dementia patients, making them feel that they have no say in their own life.

Family Meetings and Elderly Care Support (cont.)

Remember that commonly, dementia patients have minds which are working better than their ability to express themselves. Treating them like invalids will be extremely demoralizing. When in doubt, assume they do understand what is happening around them.

3. Holding the meetings.

These family meetings can be very emotionally-charged. As a precaution, have a level-headed person as a chairperson/facilitator. If a close family friend might have a more objective outlook, consider bringing them in as a "referee."

Another key aspect is to focus on "I statements." As in saying, "I think this should happen" rather than saying "You should do this." The goal of these meetings should be finding common consensus, and that becomes very difficult if everyone is pointing fingers or issuing orders.

Tips to Ensuring That Your Loved One Is Kept Safe

Being a Main Line home care provider for a loved one with dementia is no easy task.

From knowing the warning signs to keeping your family involved in the caregiving, caregivers have a huge number of considerations to keep in mind. However, without a doubt, one of the foremost concerns is keeping your loved one safe.



Dementia, of course, is a disease of the mind, and directly affects the decision-making skills and motor skills of those who are afflicted. As a Main Line home care provider, you need to do everything possible to keep your loved one safe from elements in the home environment which could hurt them.

Vital Suggestions for Protecting an Individual with Dementia

1. Safety-proof the house.

Put away or lock down any objects which might be unsafe; this could include car keys, scissors, knives, and other dangerous objects. Also consider disabling potentially dangerous appliances, such as removing the control knobs from stoves.

2. Police the exits.

If your loved one is prone to wandering, you need to keep them away from exits. Consider installing extra locks which you only have the keys for. Also consider installing motion detectors or electronic door chimes.

3. Avoid fire sources.

Beyond putting away dangerous objects, pay attention to anything which might be a source of fire and be sure that nothing like lighters are left lying around. This precaution is especially important when someone is using oxygen.

4. Minimize use of stairs.

Stairs can be extremely treacherous for seniors, and those with dementia have additional risk of falling due to decreased ability to think or move properly. When possible, reorganize the home so that everything the senior needs is on the ground floor and make sure clutter or trip hazards are picked up.

Tips to Ensuring That Your Loved One Is Kept Safe (cont.)

5. Add protection to bathrooms.

Safety rails can be a major help in bathrooms of people with dementia. Put them in the shower, near the toilet, and possibly near the sink(s) as well. Also, lay down rubber non-slip mats throughout these rooms to minimize the chance of falls due to slick flooring.

6. Know medications.

Always keep up with what medications are being used, as well as interactions and side effects. Likewise, always have the doctor's number available on speed-dial. Be ready to report any behavior that seems abnormal.



Neighborly Home Care Offers the Skilled and Compassionate Senior Home Care you Need

If you believe a loved one is beginning to show signs of dementia, you can find many sources of help. The first step is to have your loved one diagnosed by a doctor and receive medical advice.

Caring for a loved one with dementia can be an overwhelming task, and can affect your own ability to care for yourself or your family. If you need help, seek senior home care options from trained professionals who can significantly relieve your burden.

Contact the team at Neighborly Home Care today to learn more about how our caregivers can offer respite to you and compassionate assistance to your senior loved one.

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