

## **What if you can't remember? Hints when family members have memory problems.**

Ms. Lenore is 86 ½ as she proudly tells anyone who talks to her. Ms. Lenore is really almost 92 but she can't remember that. In fact Ms. Lenore has trouble remembering lots of things. She won't admit it and is fiercely proud of how independent she is. The truth of the matter is that Ms. Lenore doesn't take regular showers because she can't remember when she last had one. She is losing weight because she has forgotten how to use the stove or cook her favorite recipes. She also loses track of time and can't remember how long ago she had breakfast. She tends to wear the same clothes, picking them up from the bedroom chair where she left them the night before. She also gets very mad if anyone doubts her ability to take care of herself. She is just fine! Thank you very much!

Losing your memory is a gradual process that can be accelerated by a stroke, dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Currently over 4 million Americans have related dementia or Alzheimer's disease according to the Alzheimer's Association. A recent Gallup Poll cites that 1 in 10 Americans state that there is a family member with Alzheimer's. More than 2/3 of these individuals live at home where their family and friends provide the great majority of their care. The needs of this person increases as the disease progresses. Understanding the disease process and the behaviors of the individual can help the families cope with the debilitating decline of the individual while continuing with love and support of the individual.

The diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease is usually not a total surprise to the family who have known for some time that Mom's memory is not what it was. With a trip to the doctor's, an MRI or Pet scan can usually confirm the probable diagnosis. It's the behavior that sets off the family's suspicions that something is wrong. Some people get lost driving home or cannot find their car in the parking lot. Some forget appointments, people's names, or repeat a familiar story over and over again. Familiar tasks such as cooking, sewing, small repairs for the handyman may be insurmountable now. A man accustomed to changing the oil on his car may go out to the garage and forget why he is out there and end up cleaning the garage instead of changing the oil.

Family members are all too quick to remind the person of the lapses of memory which can irritate the individual with memory losses. They may become quite adept at making excuses to cover up their difficulties due to memory. In fact, the excuses may be so plausible that they almost make sense to someone who is not close to the person and knows better.

How can family and friends be supportive while assuring this person is loved and safe?

- Show affection with kind words and touch. This person needs to feel loved, approved, and supported.
- Don't argue unless it's really important. Let small things slide. Develop one liners like, "I didn't think of it that way." Or "Hmm, that's interesting." They are absolutely convinced they are right and you will never convince them otherwise.
- Include them in conversations. Use simple not compound statements i.e., "Dad, come to the table." not "Dad, come to the kitchen and sit at the table. We're going to have dinner." (too much information to grasp.)
- Give them a job to do. We all like to feel worthwhile and useful. Tailor the job to the individual's ability. Ideas: Raking the lawn, sweeping the porch, sidewalk or driveway, sorting laundry, drying silverware, setting the table, sorting nuts and bolts, helping you with a 150 piece puzzle. Sorting shoes in front closet.
- Simplify their life. Lay out a set of clean clothes. Put away extra shoes. Set out toothbrush on counter as a reminder. If eating is a problem, simplify the table and dish up from stove or put one item on the

plate at a time. Don't discuss the whole day's activities at once. Talk about one thing at a time. They just cannot remember all the details and confusion can turn into agitation into anger.

- When there is acting out, try and understand how they are feeling and say so. For example, "You worried about Mom going to the hospital, aren't you?" It helps if you understand why they are acting the way they are and they'll usually calm down if you are calm, reassuring and know why they are upset. It's also reassuring to them to know what they're feeling is a normal feeling because with their memory loss they don't know what's normal any more.

With the increased awareness of Alzheimer's disease and the research done to find a cure, it's important for the diagnosis of memory impairment to happen early on. Although there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, there are good medications that can help slow the progression of the disease and allow the individual good family time with those that care for them.

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