

FAMILY CAREGIVER

HEALTH BULLETIN



JANUARY 2024

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THIS MONTH'S TOPIC:

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE: ADJUSTING TO A DIAGNOSIS



Receiving the diagnosis of “Alzheimer’s disease” can feel overwhelming. It is common to be flooded with a mix of several emotions. Up to this point, you may have overlooked symptoms as signs of aging. You may have held on to the hope that your loved one’s cognitive changes would disappear with a new pill, different medication, or a change in lifestyle.

The family and diagnosis

Even though the family often sees symptoms and seeks medical attention, the Mayo Clinic admits that a dementia diagnosis can be hard for them to accept. Families can feel a range of emotions including denial, anger, and guilt. A proper diagnosis can provide a sense of relief, however. That’s because now, they can explain behaviors and find proper

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medical attention and resources. Mayo suggests using a positive lens to view the diagnosis. This can be helpful after some of the immediate emotions settle. For example, a proper diagnosis can:

- Explain cognitive and behavior changes. This allows the family and the person living with dementia to accept the changes as part of the disease process not the person.
- Lead to appropriate support and resources.
- Promote conversations with other family members, including children, so people understand what is happening and why.
- Motivate important conversations on topics such as living wills, advanced directives, caregiving, safety, housing, and financial matters. In some cases, the family might need to discuss a workplace transition.

Living with a diagnosis

For a person living with Alzheimer's disease, the diagnosis can also trigger emotions such as anger, grief, fear, shock, and uncertainty. The Mayo Clinic reports that a person living with the disease might feel fear, sadness, or embarrassment over what is to come. Like caregivers, some may feel a sense of relief as they finally have an answer to what has been going on. Still others may not be able to accept it. The Mayo Clinic warns families and caregivers to be careful with those who don't know their limitations. This can lead to risky behavior, such as cooking or driving when it is no longer safe.

Telling people about a diagnosis

The Mayo Clinic stresses the importance of respecting a person's privacy when it comes to sharing the diagnosis. When possible, decide together how and who you will tell. You also need to discuss who should share the news, which may include the person living with dementia. Everybody reacts differently to such news. Some may offer words of support or acts of kindness. Others may feel uncomfortable and avoid conversations and



interaction. In all cases, it is important to educate people about the diagnosis, symptoms, outcomes, and expectations. Talking about dementia is proven to increase understanding and reduce fear. Try not to judge people by their reactions. Some may need time to adjust. You might choose to reach back out at a later date for their support. You may even emphasize that quality relationships and positive social interaction contribute to brain health and overall health and well-being.

Families and those living with Alzheimer's disease, or another type of dementia need to understand that a diagnosis does not mean the end of a good life. Instead, a combination of local support, resources, treatments, and even research opportunities can open opportunities to preserve and/or adapt to changing cognition and daily routines. Seeking such opportunity starts with proper diagnosis and adjustment to it.

REFERENCE:

This bulletin was summarized from Mayo Clinics "Living with Dementia: A Guide to Caregiving and Support. Chapter 1: Adjusting to a Diagnosis." McPress.MayoClinic.org. September 2023.

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