

Alzheimer's: Pay Attention to the Early Warning Signs

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As the holiday season approaches, I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to have a simple conversation around the dinner table with a family member or friend to make sure he or she is OK, and to alert you to any changes in his or her memory. If you think your loved one may be having difficulty with memory, it is prudent to engage that family member and offer support, perhaps accompany him or her to the doctor. Baseline thinking exercises, imaging and blood work can reveal a problem that may be treatable.

Memory problems can be isolating, and speaking with your family and primary provider is important. The hallmark of Alzheimer's disease is an insidious time frame of memory loss. Changes can be subtle, but disconnecting from the world of electronics and connecting with family members, friends and other loved ones is crucial.

Mary is a 79-year-old woman active in the community who has been showing up late to her recent community card games. She admits to her friends that she has gotten lost in familiar places while driving. She has been increasingly "quiet" and only answers questions when specifically spoken to. She is no longer "loquacious" as her friends remember. She has become increasingly confused during her card games and over the past year, has not been the "winning shark" that she once was. Her family lives out of town and only spends time with her occasionally over the holidays. She has forgotten to pay her bills and has been going to the doctor because she has been "dizzy."

It is crucial to recognize the trouble Mary is having. She is experiencing a decline in memory as evidenced by difficulty with keeping up with her bills, as well as geographic disorientation with driving. As we get older, the speed of processing slows down. Performing the basic activities of daily living and procedural skills such as driving a car or playing the piano are preserved, but the speed of the activity may decrease. The fact that Mary is repeatedly getting lost in well-known routes is a red flag. Her paucity of speech is a red flag. This scenario is quite concerning and can represent dementia, which is characterized by a decline in memory, language, problem-solving and other cognitive skills that affects a person's ability to perform everyday activities.

The American Psychiatric Association recently redefined dementia as a major neurocognitive disorder and published new criteria for diagnosis. Overall, an individual must have evidence of significant cognitive decline, and the decline must interfere with independence in everyday activities.

One of Mary's friends saw her daughter in the supermarket during the time they were visiting. The friend discussed that she was wondering if anything was wrong. The daughter stated that everything seemed alright at the last dinner, but there were a lot of people around and the football games were playing. The daughter then spent some alone time with Mary. She realized something was wrong. There was a pile of unpaid bills, Mary couldn't figure out how to turn on her TV and her pill boxes were in disarray. When the medicines were verified and the daughter brought all the medications in a "brown bag" to the doctor, it seemed as though Mary was taking a generic and a brand form of the same blood pressure medication. This explained her dizziness.

When Mary went to the doctor with her daughter, her blood test results were normal and indicated that she did not have any major strokes or tumors. Mary was still able to understand her difficulty with her memory and verbalize this to the doctor. The daughter was established as a health-care proxy and they

discussed advanced directives. They arranged a carpool with Mary's friends because she is no longer driving. She has been linked to a community program where she can engage in cognitively stimulating leisure activities to help her maintain good brain health. Mother and daughter are working on choosing an assisted living center. In the meantime, Mary enrolled in the Safe Return program with the Alzheimer's Association and was given a bracelet that identifies her as having memory issues. There was resistance at first, but both her doctor and family explained that if she also had diabetes, a medical alert bracelet would be crucial in case she had hypoglycemia. This bracelet is no different – and necessary in case she gets lost.

So, spend time with your elderly loved ones during the holidays. Talk to them, and pay attention. Though Alzheimer's has no current cure, treatments for symptoms are available, and research continues. Although current Alzheimer's treatments cannot stop the disease from progressing, there are medications to help with symptoms and improve quality of life for those with Alzheimer's and their caregivers.