

By Shaun Meyer

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The Smith family reunion has always been an event everyone looks forward to. Family visits, games, stories and everyone's favorite foods are always on the agenda. On the top of the menu is Grandma's Lemon Coconut Cake. Grandma always makes the traditional cake from her old family recipe. This year, however, the cake tasted a little on the salty side, perhaps a half cup full of salty.

Though the family was disappointed over the cake, of more concern was Grandma's confusion with the recipe and her similar confusion about the loved ones around her. Could something be wrong with grandma's mental state?

One might say that for an elder person a little forgetfulness or confusion is normal, but when do you know if there is a serious problem, such as dementia?

An online article from FamilyDoctor.org outlines some common symptoms in recognizing dementia.

Dementia causes many problems for the person who has it and for the person's family. Many of the problems are caused by memory loss. Some common symptoms of dementia are listed below. Not everyone who has dementia will experience all of these symptoms.

- Recent memory loss. All of us forget things for a while and then remember them later. People who have dementia often forget things, but they never remember them.

They might ask the same question over and over, each time forgetting that you've already given them the answer. They won't even remember that they already asked the question.

- Difficulty performing familiar tasks. People who have dementia might cook a meal but forget to serve it. They might even forget that they cooked it.

- Problems with language. People who have dementia may forget simple words or use the wrong words. This makes it hard to understand what they want.

- Time and place disorientation. People who have dementia may get lost on their own street. They may forget how they got to a certain place and how to get back home.

- Poor judgment. Even a person who doesn't have dementia might get distracted. But people who have dementia can forget simple things, like forgetting to put on a coat before going out in cold weather.

- Problems with abstract thinking. Anybody might have trouble balancing a checkbook, but people who have dementia may forget what the numbers are and what has to be done with them.

- Misplacing things. People who have dementia may put things in the wrong places. They might put an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl. Then they can't find these things later.

- Changes in mood. Everyone is moody at times, but people who have dementia may have fast mood swings, going from calm to tears to anger in a few minutes.

- Personality changes. People who have dementia may have drastic changes in personality.

They might become irritable, suspicious or fearful.

- Loss of initiative. People who have dementia may become passive. They might not want to go places or see other people.”

Dementia is caused by change or destruction of brain cells. Often this change is a result of small strokes or blockage of blood cells, severe hypothyroidism or Alzheimer’s disease.

There is a continuous decline in ability to perform normal daily activities. Personal care including dressing, bathing, preparing meals and even eating a meal eventually becomes impossible.

What can family members do if they suspect dementia? An appointment with the doctor or geriatric clinic is the first step to take. Depending on the cause and severity of the problem there are some medications that may help slow the process.

Your doctor may recommend a care facility that specializes in dementia and Alzheimer’s. These facilities offer a variety of care options from day care with stimulating activities to part or full-time live-in options. Sometimes if patients tend to wander off, a locked facility is needed.

In the beginning family members find part time caregivers for their loved one. At first, loved ones need only a little help with remembering to do daily activities or prepare meals.

As dementia progresses, care giving demands often progress to 24-hour care. Night and day become confused and normal routines of sleeping, eating and functioning become more difficult for the patient. The demented person feels frustrated and may lash out in anger or fear.

It is not uncommon for a child or spouse giving the care to quickly become overwhelmed and discouraged.

Family gatherings provide an excellent opportunity to discuss care giving plans and whole family support. It is most helpful if everyone in the family is united in supporting a family caregiver in some meaningful way.

The first step to holding a family meeting, and perhaps the most difficult one, is to get all interested persons together in one place at one time. If it's a family gathering, perhaps a birthday, an anniversary or another special event could be used as a way to get all to meet. Or maybe even a special dinner might be an incentive.

The end of the meeting should consist of asking everyone present to make his or her commitment to support the plan.

This might just simply be moral support and agreement to abide by the provisions or it is hoped that those attending will volunteer to do something constructive.

This might mean commitments to providing care, transportation, financial support, making legal arrangements or some other tangible support.

Professional home care services are an option to help families in the home. These providers are trained and skilled to help with dementia patients.

Don't forget care facilities as well. It may be the best loving care a family member can give is to place their loved one in a facility where that person is safely monitored and cared for.

The National Care Planning Council supports care giving services throughout the country.
www.longtermcarelink.net