

Changing Minds

Alzheimers Disease and Dementia

THIS BOOKLET HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO MAKE YOU THINK TWICE ABOUT HOW YOU VIEW PEOPLE WITH ALZHEIMERS DISEASE AND DEMENTIA

The campaign to increase the understanding of mental health problems and reduce their [stigma] and discrimination.

Dementia is a devastating disease. It robs you of all your faculties. They say it is like a second childhood. But it isn't.

A child is a developing person. A man with dementia is a disintegrating person. He was a man. He lived alone. He had a family, a wife, children. He was gay. He was black. He was white. He was a successful businessman. He was someone who didn't do what he wanted.

He spent his adult life getting washed, dressed, going to the toilet, shaving, eating. He could speak. He could laugh at a joke. He could look after himself.

Now, bit by bit he slides into dependence. It is not childlike. The infant takes her care for granted. He fights against his. The baby loves having her nappy changed. His incontinence pad shames him. The toddler gladly takes the other's hand. He cannot abide being lead from place to place. Or if he can, you cannot bear to see it.

You cannot bear to see the man who walked with you through the park becoming someone who no longer knows what a park is.

The change comes slowly. Who is to say that this is the moment at which you stop seeing him as himself? He loses his dignity when you stop treating him with dignity.

1. Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia

When he was 40 this man said that if he ever ended up like this he should be taken out and shot. Now he's 70 and he can't remember being 40. On a good day he can still recognise his daughter.

She can recognise him every day. He is not the man he was. But parts of him are still there. His particular frown. The way he folds his handkerchief. His delight when he hears the birds sing.

When a person can't remember or do the things he used to do, he is like a different person. If he also acts differently you might say he is not the man he was. But that depends on what makes him the man he is.

2. Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia

Grandpa used to be a wonderful storyteller. Now he doesn't talk much at all. He tries to

sometimes, but the words don't come out right. Then he talks louder and shouts and points with his hand. Sometimes he cries.

There are many sorts of dementia such as Alzheimer's disease. They all affect the brain. Gradually the person loses his memory. He can't do the things he used to. In the end he cannot speak.

This doesn't happen overnight. It happens gradually, bit by bit. In the middle of it is a person who knows he is losing his mind, his independence, and his place in the world. Alongside him is his family, who know they are losing him. Just because he cannot speak, it does not mean he cannot understand.

3. Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia

He used to be an angry young man but now he's an angry old one. He was quite a sight in those days - printing pamphlets, shouting from the platform, struggling with the police. He was a leader of the student revolution. They took notice of him then. Now they only pay attention when he threatens the nurse with his stick.

Dementia affects the brain. The person gradually loses his intelligence, his memory and his personality. Some go quietly, others rebel. They can shout or swear or even strike out. This is distressing for people close to them.

But for the man himself? Perhaps it is better than being invisible.

4. Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia

In the war this woman was a land girl in Norfolk. Now she keeps trying to go back to the farm, but it isn't there anymore.

People with dementia become muddled. They forget where they are. They may act as if they are somewhere else. They may not know what time it is. They may mix up night and day. They can wander out of their houses in the small hours believing it is time to go shopping.

This woman is confused. She is losing contact with the present. The past has become more real. The future remains unknown.

5. Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia

If your mind goes do you go with it?

FACTS ABOUT ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE AND DEMENTIA

What is dementia?

Dementia is an illness which causes changes in a person's memory, intellect and personality. The illness usually starts gradually, with deterioration occurring over several years. Later there may be other problems such as changes in behaviour, including wandering and personal neglect. Thinking and speech become restricted. Physical health problems may develop and a person can often become bedridden and incontinent. Most people with dementia continue to live at home.

Who gets dementia?

Dementia usually affects people over 65 years old. About one in five people over 80 have the illness. More rarely people under 65 have dementia. With increasing life expectancy, dementia is becoming more common. It affects both men and women.

What causes dementia?

The most common type of dementia is Alzheimer's disease. We do not know what causes this illness. A number of changes occur in the structure and functioning of the brains of people with Alzheimer's disease. Sometimes Alzheimer's disease seems to run in families. It is more common in people with Down's syndrome. Other factors which may increase the risk of dementia include severe head injury, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, smoking, heavy drinking and being overweight. Dementia can also be caused by a series of mini-strokes (called multi-infarct dementia). More rarely, dementia can result from other causes such as infection (including AIDS), dietary neglect, alcohol, damage to the brain through boxing or a brain tumour.

What treatments are available?

Some mental health professionals - including doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists and occupational therapists - work in multidisciplinary teams with a special expertise in the problems of older age. The team may need to investigate any physical disorders and to assess a person's social, psychological and living skills. A full mental health assessment helps the members of the team to understand the nature of a person's problems and to plan treatment.

The aim of treatment is to try and maintain a person's quality of life for as long as possible. It is likely to involve a number of approaches - both medical and other more practical interventions. Regular health checks and keeping as fit as possible will help reduce the speed of physical deterioration.

Drug treatment may occasionally be useful, for example, regular aspirin can help if the dementia is caused by someone having a series of small strokes. New drugs can improve the way people think in the early stages of the illness. We don't yet know whether they delay deterioration long term.

Self-help techniques such as writing notes of things to do, keeping a diary and 'exercising the brain' can help with managing memory problems. People with dementia generally function better in a familiar environment, such as their home, than in an institution. They may need extra support to continue living at home. Family members and other carers need emotional support, practical help and information about the illness.

The family doctor and other members of the general practice may also be involved in the treatment plan.

What can society do?

Public education can help us to have a better understanding of the nature of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. With this understanding should come increased tolerance. We can respect the dignity and recognise the existing skills of people with dementia. We can offer more assistance, through both emotional support and appropriate financial help, to families caring for someone at home. If this is no longer possible, we can provide good quality residential and nursing homes.

Further reading

All About Dementia.

Mental Health Foundation,
London Office
9th Floor
Sea Containers House
20 Upper Ground
London, SE1 9QB
Tel: 020 7803 1100
Fax: 020 7803 1111.
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Helpful Organisations

Alzheimer's Society

Devon House,
58 St Katharine's Way, London
E1W 1JX
Helpline: 0845 300 0336.
Telephone: 020 7423 3500
Email:
enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk
.Alzheimer's Society is a
membership organisation,
which works to improve the
quality of life of people affected
by dementia in England, Wales
and Northern Ireland.
Many of our 25,000 members
have personal experience of
dementia, as carers, health
professionals or people with
dementia themselves, and
their experiences help to
inform our work.

Age Concern

Age Concern England
Astral House
1268 London Road
London SW16 4ER
Free helpline: 0800 00 99 66
Provides information and
advice for older people and
their carers.
www.ageconcern.org.uk/

Alzheimer Society of Ireland National Office

Temple Road
Blackrock
Co Dublin
Ireland
Tel: + 353 1 207 3800
Helpline: 1800 341 341
Fax: +353 1 284 6030
Email: info@alzheimer.ie
www.alzheimer.ie/
Provides information and practical
help to the carers of Alzheimer's
disease victims and their families

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Professor Arthur Crisp

Chairman,
Changing Minds Campaign Management Committee

Please note that we are unable to offer advice on individual cases. Please see our [FAQ](#) for advice on getting help.