

What is Dementia?



**Del Mar Caregiver
Resource Center**

Supporting Caregivers through their Journey

Dementia Defined

Is it dementia or Alzheimer's disease? This is a frequently asked question.

Dementia is a medical term used to describe symptoms of impaired brain functioning caused by a neurological condition such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, traumatic brain injuries and others. Most common symptoms of dementia include memory loss, confusion, impaired thinking and judgement.

Therefore, the answer to the question, is it dementia or Alzheimer's? Symptoms of dementia are caused by Alzheimer's disease or other neurological conditions.

Neurology

To further understand dementia, it helps to review basics of neurology.

- Neurology is the branch of medicine concerned with the structure, function, and diseases of the brain and nervous system.
- The nervous system supports our capacity to think, interpret and understand the world around us.
- The nervous system also supports the functions of breathing, digestion and motor skills.

The human nervous system consists of the **Central Nervous System** which consists of the brain and spinal cord. The Central Nervous System can be thought of as our primary command center. The **Peripheral Nervous System** consists of the network of nerves that run throughout the body connected to the Central Nervous System.

Dementia impairs the functioning of the human nervous system.

Causes of Dementia

Current scientific thinking speculates the potential of multiple causal factors for the development of dementia. They include,

- A combination of hereditary (APO4), environmental and lifestyle factors
 - Progressive medical conditions like Alzheimer's disease
 - Medical conditions that disrupt oxygen flow to the brain (Stroke)
 - Poor nutrition, dehydration, drugs and alcohol
 - Infections that affect the central nervous system
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Neurological Conditions

Neurological conditions most frequently associated with dementia include,

- Alzheimer's disease
- Pick's disease
- Huntington's disease
- Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease
- Lewy Body disease
- Vascular (stroke)

Symptoms of Dementia

In broad terms symptoms of dementia fall into the following areas of brain functioning,

- Difficulty thinking clearly, expressing thoughts, remembering words, absorbing and retaining information.
- Confusion with time, place and for recognizing persons familiar to the person.
- Impaired use of judgement
- Personality and behavior changes

Challenges With Daily Living

The world of a person living with dementia is a confusing place. Behavior patterns develop that can be difficult for others to understand.

- Asking the same question repeatedly
- Easily getting lost in familiar places
- Unable to follow simple directions
- Confused about the date or time of day
- Unable to recognize familiar people
- Unable to perform routine tasks like paying bills, turning on the TV, getting dressed or undressed
- Not maintaining personal hygiene and grooming

Six Core Functions of the Human Brain

Dementia affects people differently. There can be situations where a person with dementia may appear to function normally. The fluctuating and progressive nature of dementia symptoms

make it difficult at times to understand. To put this dynamic in perspective, it helps to review the six core functions of the human brain.

- Attention / Concentration
- Language
- Visual-Spatial Perception / Reasoning
- Learning (storage) / Memory (retrieval)
- Executive Functioning: ability to plan, organize, carry out and evaluate actions and activities
- Motor Functioning: walking, balance, grasping, chewing, swallowing, breathing

Dementia may not affect all six areas of a person's brain functioning. Impairments may surface in one, several, or all areas of brain functioning. Extended duration of time observing the individual is often required before fully comprehending the degree and nature of how dementia is affecting the person. This understanding is necessary to prevent misunderstanding the extent of a person's impairment or misinterpreting behaviors.

Dementia's Connection to Behavior

Brain functioning is directly connected to behavior. Freud believed that behavior is motivated by unconscious defenses against anxiety. We have come to learn that behavior is not random or accidental, but purposeful. In this context we can view behavior as a response to the environment in trying to fulfill needs.

Understanding Behavior of a Person with Dementia

- The environment of a person with dementia is continuously changing.
- Person's with dementia are always trying to adapt to their environment.
- Impaired brain functioning interrupts normal ways thinking, interpreting and understanding the environment around us.
- Dementia behaviors communicate attempts to make sense out of confusion.
- Problem behaviors that may develop are not intentional, acting out, infantile, regressive, or intended to be disruptive.

Additional Factors Influencing Behavior

It is important to acknowledge additional factors that can influence behavior,

- Physical pain & illness
- Metabolic imbalances and infections
- Medication side effects

- Environmental overstimulation such as noise, crowded rooms, multiple conversations

To illustrate the thinking of a person with dementia imagine the following situations and ask yourself first how you would respond to them. Then reflect on what you have learned about dementia and ask yourself how a person with dementia would respond to the same situations.

Here are some examples:

- You are home alone when someone knocks on your door at 10 PM.
- You have a doctor's appointment in the morning to receive the results from a biopsy.
- You wish to pay off your credit card in 3 years.
- You are about to cross the street when the light suddenly turns red.

Responding to Behaviors

Responding in a supportive way to behaviors presented by a person with dementia is supported by knowledge of basic human behavior, empathy and identifying triggers.

Why is this behavior happening?

- What happened just before/right after the behavior?
- What changed in the person's environment?
- Is the person responding to something internal (thoughts, memory, pain, illness) or external (environment)?
- How might the person be interpreting things?
- How might the behavior be an attempt to adapt to a stressor?
- How are you responding to the person and their behavior?

Caring for a person with dementia is physically difficult and emotionally draining. Observing a loved one gradually fall into dementia is harder yet. People with dementia, regardless of the extent of their condition, retain the ability to feel and respond to kindness and love. The best way to ensure dignity of individuals living with a disabling condition is to love and protect.

For information about caregiver services, call:
Del Mar Caregiver Resource Center | 1-800-624-8304
Or visit: www.delmarcaregiver.org

This paper was prepared by Sam Trevino, MSW, LCSW, Health Services Manager for Health Projects Center (HPC). HPC is a nonprofit organization that administers the Del Mar Caregiver Resource Center. For more information about HPC please visit www.hpcn.org