

The Thurston-Mason Senior News

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The Family Caregiver

The Benefits of Getting a Dementia Diagnosis

"My mom is always repeating herself, asking the same questions, getting irritable and forgetting to eat. She cannot remember anything minute to minute and she just seems different. It has to be Dementia. So why should I go through the hassle of getting a formal diagnosis? What do they know that I do not see every day?"

It might be Dementia. It might not. A Dementia diagnosis can be freeing to know and motivate you to learn what is next. A diagnosis may also be frightening, because to know begs the question, "What comes next?"

If you suspect someone in your life has Dementia, especially in the early stages, ruling out other illnesses is very important. What may look like Dementia could also be untreated diabetes or depression, or perhaps symptoms of a small stroke or even an undetected traumatic brain injury from a recent fall. It could also be a thyroid deficiency, delirium, or brain tumor. There are many reasons to seek a diagnosis, because ruling out what it is not is key.

Nothing is wasted when you play detective and look for what is wrong. You may be looking for a Dementia diagnosis, but find a completely different problem. If you learn they are diabetic, you can explore care options. If they are depressed, you can seek medication and/or counseling. If it is a thyroid deficiency, there is treatment. There may still be a Dementia lurking behind or being masked by other medical problems. Treating the identified medical problem will allow the Dementia to become more evident.



Who can diagnose Dementia? It may be your primary care practitioner. They may refer you to a neurologist, perhaps even a psychiatrist, especially to rule out other illnesses. The specialist is likely to assess, run tests such as an MRI, possibly recommend a medication and return your care to your primary care practitioner.

Treatments for Dementias like Alzheimer's are not curative. They are mostly palliative. Medications for Alzheimer's can often, in early states, provide the person with the illness some time with greater clarity. It can be difficult for caregivers to accept that the clarity is only temporary; however, the temporary help from medications allows a period of time where they may be able to participate and sign important documents such as a will, power of attorney, and an advanced care plan. A diagnosis provides the opportunity to plan, treat and develop social supports. An early diagnosis allows even more time to prepare.

While there are no curative treatments, there are social interventions. We all know the brain needs oxygen and glucose or sugar to work. That is also true for those with Dementia. However, research has shown that adding social activities which support the person with Dementia encourages them to continue to use hard-wired social neurology, which we all possess, even introverts. Research has shown that participants in such social programs increase, and later maintain, a level of comprehension and useful vocabulary over those who do not participate in such activities.

Adult Day Care is one such intervention or program which helps the person with a Dementia feel useful, be social and be with others where they do not feel inadequate. The STARS program provided by Senior Services for South Sound (SSSS) offers an outstanding Adult Day Care program for those with Dementia. [[http://](http://www.southsound seniors.org)

www.southsound seniors.org] Participants who attend often look forward to the day with others, come home tired in a good way, and both they and their caregivers get a good night's rest. (Those who are caregivers or have been parents know what we mean.)

Other social programs include Momentia. SSSS is the local leader for this program, which started in Seattle. Programs are designed with the person who has Dementia in mind. Social activities such as Memory Care, art classes, music experiences, and other events are all part of providing meaningful activities for people with Dementia at any stage.

These new interventions are the best reason to get a diagnosis, and an early one. There are programs right now that provide people with even early stage Alzheimer's AND their caregivers a sense of purpose and participation in life and the community.

You are not alone. There are millions of people doing the same important care for family members. Get connected. They are waiting to hear from you.

This article is a service of the Lewis Mason Thurston Area Agency on Aging. For more information about the Family Caregiver Support Program, call (360) 664-2168 and ask to speak with a Resource Manager or visit our website at WWW.LMTAAA.ORG