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Having the Conversation about Alzheimer's

Needing to have a talk about Alzheimer's disease or memory loss with a parent can be a daunting task for many adult children. For seniors, the idea of being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease can trigger fear, anxiety, or even grief. It's no wonder some adult children put the conversation off, once they see the initial signs in their loved one. What's more, if the afflicted senior already has impaired judgment or memory loss from the disease, it may already be too late for a rational, cohesive conversation about it. In any case, it's wise to approach the topic – and your loved one – with great sensitivity and care.

Taking Your Loved One to See the Doctor

Symptoms related to the early signs of Alzheimer's disease, such as memory loss, confusion, mood swings, changes in personality, difficulty completing certain tasks or finding the correct word could also be caused by a number of other medical or psychiatric problems. Mentioning that your loved one's symptoms could be the result of another underlying issue may make him or her more willing to visit the doctor for a full examination and a proper diagnosis.

You may also want to consider offering to go to the doctor with your loved one as part of a morning or afternoon outing, such as going to lunch, shopping, or some other activity. An enjoyable event could take the sting out of having to visit the doctor for a firm diagnosis.

Once Alzheimer's Has Been Diagnosed

How you approach your loved one to talk about an Alzheimer's diagnosis can depend on your relationship with him or her. Are you close enough to have a frank conversation, and will the senior readily welcome your suggestions and help? Or does your loved one tend to keep things private, and could become embarrassed or self-conscious? Will he or she feel insulted? However you approach your parent, it is imperative for him or her to feel supported and encouraged during this difficult time.

Researchers have found that families who don't discuss the disease with their loved one may witness increased fear and paranoia. Instead, it is better to be open about it, while reassuring your loved one that it is a fairly common brain illness. Tell him or her that there is nothing that could have been done to prevent it, but there are things that can help slow the disease and you will do your best to help. Also, allay any fear of abandonment. While it's scary to think of losing memory and forgetting the family, it is even more frightening to think that the family will forget them. Ease your loved one's anxiety by telling him or her that no matter what happens, you will get through it together.

Discussing the Diagnosis

Hearing about an Alzheimer's diagnosis from one's child can be hard to take, but chances are your loved one already knows that something is going on long before a doctor reaches a diagnosis – and he or she has the right to know what is happening. Here are some suggestions on how to discuss the disease:

- Informing your parent may enable him or her to participate in making important medical, legal, financial, long-term care, and end-of-life decisions. How involved he or she is will depend on the current state of the disease symptoms.
- He or she may not be able to totally understand the diagnosis, or may deny what you say. If so, accept this reaction for now, and avoid further detailed explanations of the disease until later.
- You may choose to disclose the diagnosis at a family meeting attended by your loved one, other family members, a trusted friend, or even a member of the clergy or a social worker. You also may want to invite a healthcare professional who works with those who are cognitively impaired.
- Write up some simple answers to a loved one's questions, or encourage them to speak with his or her doctor about concerns.

Fast Fact

An estimated 5.4 million Americans have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, 5.2 million of them age 65 or over – and every 66 seconds, someone develops the disease.

- Reassure your loved one. Let them know that you will provide ongoing help and support, and do whatever is possible to improve their quality of life.
- Treat the person as an adult, and don't downplay the disease. As the dementia progresses, remain open to the person's need to talk about their illness and its implications – such as their ability to work, drive, and manage finances.
- Allow your loved one to express his or her feelings, which may include anger, frustration, and disappointment. Be aware of non-verbal signs of sadness, anger or anxiety, and respond with love and reassurance.
- Watch for signs of clinical depression, which could result from being told that Alzheimer's is a terminal illness, and consult with a physician if needed.
- Find community support services. Support groups for those in the early stages of the disease can be helpful in expressing emotions and concerns.

Comfort Keepers® can help. We have compassionate in-home caregivers who are specially trained to work with a family member who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and other dementias. Call your local Comfort Keepers® office to discover all the services we can provide for your loved one.

References:

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