

LIVING WITH MEMORY LOSS SERIES

Questions You May Have

Is severe memory loss a normal part of aging? It is not a normal part of aging. Symptoms include having difficulty remembering things, making decisions and performing tasks. These changes can affect the way a person feels and acts. There is currently no way to stop the disease but there is hope that research will find a cure.

Are there treatments available? Several medications are now available to slow down an onset of symptoms. **Aricept, Exelon** and **Reminyl** are all in a family of drugs known as cholinesterase inhibitors. These drugs increase the concentration of the chemical acetylcholine in the brain, helping increase communication among nerve cells. Many people notice improvement in their ability to perform daily activities when taking these medications. A newer medication, Memantine, sold under the brand name **Namenda** works on the glutamate receptors of the brain. Some doctors are prescribing Namenda along with one of the cholinesterase inhibitors to patients diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

If you have a vascular dementia, your doctor may prescribe a cholinesterase inhibitor, but will certainly prioritize monitoring your blood pressure and taking any related blood pressure medications or anticoagulants that have been prescribed.

If you have memory loss problems connected with complications of diabetes you will need to monitor your blood sugar levels and take any prescribed medications.

In general, whatever type of memory loss disorder you have, make certain to stay on your medications, contact your doctor with any concerns, or ask for help if you are forgetting to take your medications as prescribed.

How will my diagnosis affect my family? Having a chronic disease affects everyone who loves you. Being open to share your feelings about the disease can bring you closer to your family. If you are open about your feelings it gives your family members the opportunity to do the same. Family counseling may help. Early counseling can help reduce stress and depression, improve self-esteem, and help you maintain your sense of dignity. Counseling can help family members as well. They can learn coping skills and can talk about their feelings. Many health care plans provide coverage for this kind of counseling.

How will memory loss change my marriage? Attitude has everything to do with your relationship. The best attitude to have is an open and positive attitude. Remember, the period between the first symptoms and the more severe decline can be ten years or more. There are many years in which you can have a productive life. Express your feelings with your spouse and make plans for your life together.

A common trap is to resent the spouse who assumes more responsibility. It is important for you to accept that you will need to allow your spouse to help sometimes. It is also important that you continue to try to do things for yourself. If you *can* do something, you *should*. As these problems arise, you need honest, non-angry conversations to overcome them.

Discuss when you need help and what you can still do. Your spouse needs to remember that you are probably more capable than you seem. You need to remember that you are probably less capable than you think you are. Look for solutions you can both live with.

Should I practice the skills I am losing? The decision to practice skills you are losing depends on the potential danger of the activity and on how frustrated you feel when you practice.

Some activities are too dangerous to practice. For example, if you are losing your driving skills or your ability to use a saw or use a gas stove you should talk to a family member about whether or not you should try that activity.

Other skills less dangerous can be practiced if they aren't frustrating to you. Many people find that practice can help to accomplish the activity.

How can I achieve my goals? You may need to adjust your plans and become creative to meet your goals. Be willing to include a family member or a friend to help you become successful. Here are two examples taken from the book, "Alzheimer's: The Answers You Need".

Example One: The Trip A couple wanted to tour Europe by car. However, the husband developed Alzheimer's disease and it became unsafe for him to drive. He adjusted his expectation; they joined an organized tour and saw Europe by coach. It was not the trip they planned, but it was still a fine trip.

Example Two: The Hobby We know one man who is a nut for flowers. He wanted to become a tour leader at the Botanical Gardens after he retired. Then he was diagnosed with a progressive vascular dementia. It affected him in such a way that he could not lecture. However, he adjusted his expectations and he still goes to the Botanical Gardens regularly. He is responsible for tending a particular section. This is within his abilities; it gives him an interest and responsibility outside the house; and he is doing something he loves. He was disappointed that he could not lecture, but he found a creative way of working at the Botanical Gardens anyway.

If you can compromise and work within your limitations, you can achieve many of your goals.

Will I know if I make mistakes? A progressive memory loss disorder is changing you and you can no longer do as much as you believe you can.

Sometimes you will know you have made a mistake and other times you will not know. For example, you may realize you cannot remember a word, but you may not notice an error in your checkbook.

If there is something you can safely do, do it. If you can only do a part, do that. You need to rely on the advice of your family members or caregiver for what you should continue to do and what you must trust others to do. Listen to others and accept their help.

What should I do when I feel confused or afraid? If you become confused or afraid the most important thing not to do is *Panic!* The more stress you have, the harder it will be to remember. The panic is just a momentary problem.

To feel in control again, sit down, take some deep breaths, and give yourself a moment to think. Look around slowly while you breathe, and try to pick up any signs or cues that will help end your confusion. If someone you know is nearby, tell them how you feel. Sometimes just telling someone that you feel frightened helps the moment pass.

What if you are out walking alone and become lost?

- ❖ Always wear the Safe Return bracelet or other ID bracelet. It will provide full information about who you are and where you live.
- ❖ Carry a cell phone
- ❖ Do not keep walking. You may be going in the wrong direction.
- ❖ Sit down, collect your thoughts and breathe.

- ❖ Never be afraid or embarrassed to ask for help from a stranger. You may be surprised at how helpful a stranger will be if you ask for help. They can take you home, call your home, or call the police to help you.

What if am driving and I become lost?

- ❖ Wear a Safe Return Bracelet or other ID bracelet.
- ❖ Carry a cell phone
- ❖ Only drive as far as the next building or business. Do not continue to drive. Pull into a parking lot.
- ❖ Ask someone in the building or on the street to assist you.
- ❖ Do not ask for directions, you may get lost.
- ❖ Have someone make a call home for you and tell your family where you are so they can pick you up.
- ❖ If you do not see any buildings pull to the side of road, raise the hood of the car, put on emergency flashers. Do not leave the car. Wait for someone to stop.

It is so hard to socialize; should I continue? There may be challenges to socializing with others. It is difficult to keep up with the conversation, and it is hard to get in your comments before everyone moves on.

Even though it is difficult, it is important to maintain friendships and social contact.

Here are some suggestions to empower you:

- ❖ Avoid unstructured and noisy gatherings
- ❖ Accept that you have slowed down. Enjoy yourself on the level you can by listening to interesting people or watch the fun.
- ❖ Use a signal to let people know when you would like to speak. For example, hold up a finger when you would like to say something.
- ❖ Invite friends to a concert or movie; invite them for a hike or a trip to the park. Have a small party at your home.