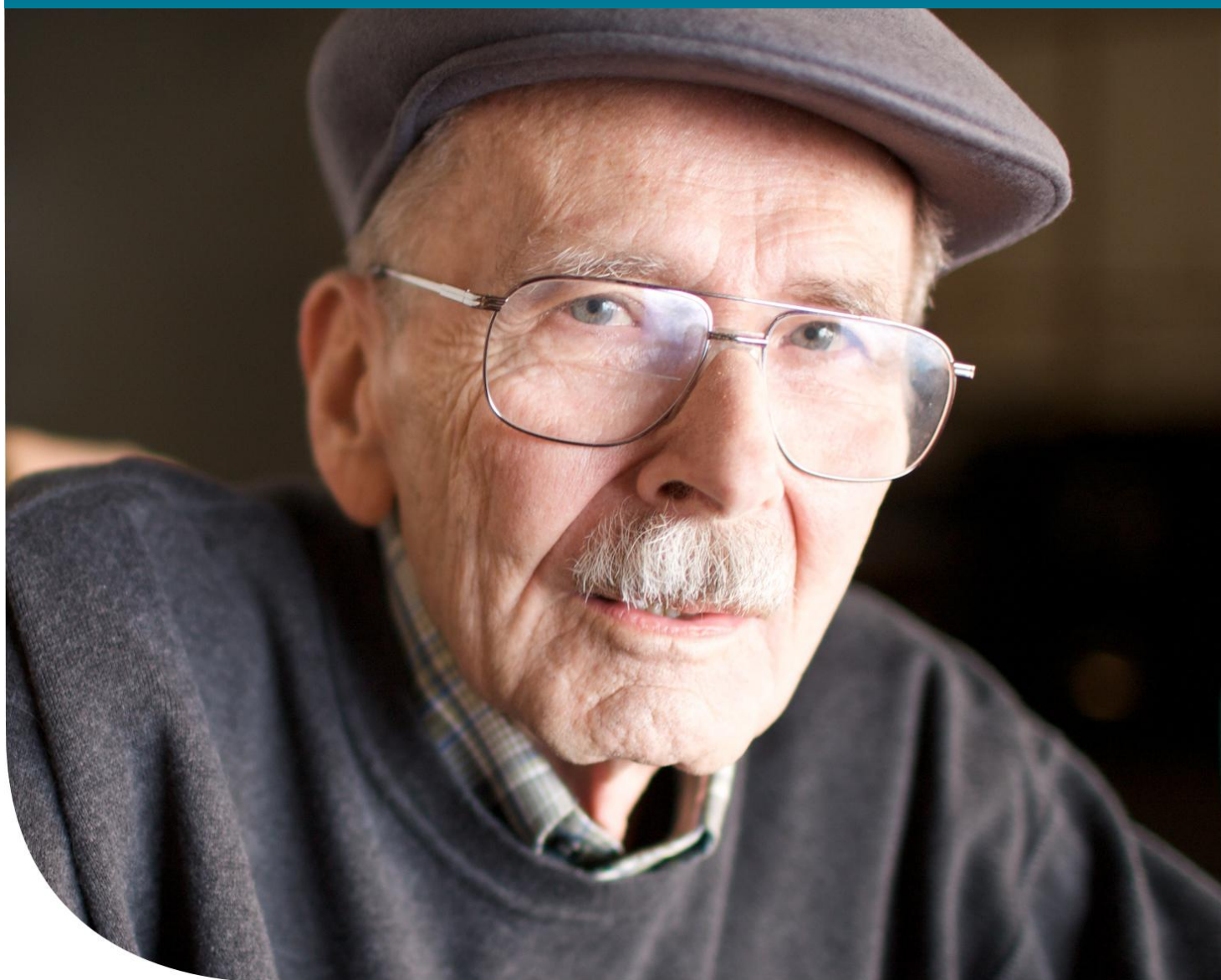


DEALING WITH COGNITIVE ISSUES

CARING FOR YOUR PARENTS: EDUCATION FOR THE FAMILY CAREGIVER®



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Many of us may joke about having “old timers” disease, but when cognitive impairment strikes one of our parents, the laughter often turns to fear.

The good news is that not all signs of cognitive changes mean that your senior loved one has Alzheimer’s disease. In fact, many health issues – even some as simple as a vitamin deficiency – can lead to cognitive impairment.

In some cases, the symptoms are reversible. There are also activities we can encourage our senior loved ones to do to prevent and improve cognitive disabilities.

During this workshop, we will look at the definition of cognitive dysfunction and symptoms that might demonstrate that your parent is suffering from its effects. We’ll also talk about some of the problems and causes of cognitive issues, including those related to Alzheimer’s disease or other dementia.

Finally, we’ll give you some ways to help you and your senior loved one cope with cognitive impairments.



Did you know...?

According to researchers at the Indiana School of Medicine, by the time we reach age 65 or more, one fourth of us may be wrestling with a failing memory and other mild cognitive problems.

DEFINITIONS AND SYMPTOMS

The definition of the word **cognition** is the process of knowing and includes aspects such as reasoning, awareness, perception, knowledge, intuition, and judgment.

Cognitive skills are the mental capabilities that a person has which allow them to process all the information they receive from their five senses. These skills are needed for a person to be able to think, talk, learn and read. They are what give a person the ability to recall things from memory. Cognitive skills also are needed to analyze images and sounds.

Cognitive problems, also referred to as cognitive deficits or dysfunctions, occur when a person has difficulties processing information, including mental tasks such as attention, thinking, language, emotional behavior and memory.

Mild cognitive impairment is the stage between normal forgetfulness due to aging and the development of dementia. In general, these symptoms do not interfere with everyday activities and include forgetting recent events or conversations, difficulty multi-tasking or solving problems and taking longer to perform more difficult mental activities.

Another type of cognitive dysfunction is **dementia**. Dementia is the loss of cognitive functioning and intellectual reasoning due to changes in the brain.

Symptoms of dementia can include:

- tendency to repeat questions
- becoming disoriented in familiar places
- neglecting personal hygiene or nutrition
- getting confused about people or time
- language problems, such as trouble finding the name of familiar objects

- misplacing items
- personality changes and loss of social skills
- losing interest in things once enjoyed
- a flat mood
- difficulty performing tasks that take some thought, but that used to come easily

Alzheimer’s disease is the leading form of dementia. The symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease may include:

- forgetting details about current events
- forgetting events in one’s own life history and losing awareness of who you are
- change in sleep patterns, often waking up at night
- increased difficulty reading or writing
- poor judgment and loss of the ability to recognize danger
- using the wrong word, not pronouncing words correctly or speaking in confusing sentences
- withdrawing from social contact
- having hallucinations, arguments, striking out, and violent behavior
- having delusions, depression, and agitation
- becoming easily upset at home, at work, with friends or in places where they are out of their comfort zone
- difficulty doing basic tasks, such as preparing meals, choosing proper clothing, or driving
- incontinence
- swallowing problems



Certainly recognizing any of these signs, even the mild ones, can be a cause for concern. Getting your parent to see a doctor to determine the cause of your senior loved one’s cognitive problem is the best next step.

Notes:

CAUSES OF COGNITIVE PROBLEMS

Now let's look at some of the causes that can lead to cognitive dysfunction. Not all cognitive impairment is a result of Alzheimer's disease or other dementia.

- **Stress, anxiety, and fatigue** have all been found to affect memory. Studies have shown that older men with elevated levels of the stress hormone epinephrine are more likely to suffer from mild cognitive impairment than those of their peers with normal levels. Another study showed that everyday stresses combined with major stressful events may exert a cumulative effect over a lifetime that exacerbates cognitive decline.
- Many of our parents who suffer from diseases associated with aging such as may end up with cognitive dysfunction as a result of treatments of these conditions.
- **Cancer treatments** are a common cause of cognitive problems. Cancer.net reports that approximately 20 percent of people who undergo chemotherapy will experience some cognitive problem side effects. Radiation treatment to the head or neck is also a known cause of cognitive problems.
- **Other conditions or symptoms related to cancer or cancer treatments**, including anemia, fatigue, stress, depression, insomnia, high blood calcium, and electrolyte imbalances can also result in cognitive dysfunction.

Did you know...?

Duke University's Medical Center researchers have found that two years after major non-cardiac surgery, 42% of elderly patients will have experienced a measurable cognitive decline.



Other causes of cognitive dysfunction include:

- brain cancer or other cancers that spread to the brain, or brain surgery
- hormone therapy
- medications, including those for anti-nausea, antibiotics, pain medications, antidepressants, heart medications, and those to treat sleep disorders
- infections, especially those of the central nervous system and that cause a high fever
- not having enough of specific vitamins and minerals, such as iron, vitamin B, or folic acid
- untreated vision problems, and
- other brain or nervous system disorders such as multiple sclerosis

Dementia can be caused by many things, some of which are reversible – such as vitamin deficiencies and poor nutrition, to reactions to medications or problems with the thyroid. However, some forms of dementia are irreversible, such as that caused by mini strokes or Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's disease occurs when the nerve cells deteriorate in the brain due to a build up of plaques and tangles, which actually results in the death of a large number of brain cells. Doctors are not sure why this occurs, but research is underway to determine causes and cures.

Did you know...?

According to the Alzheimer's Association, 4.5 million Americans are presently living with Alzheimer's disease.

Developing Alzheimer's disease is not a part of normal aging. In fact, the causes of Alzheimer's disease are not entirely known, but are thought to include both genetic and environmental factors. A diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease is made when certain symptoms are present, and by making sure other causes of dementia and cognitive dysfunction are not present.

Regardless of the cause of cognitive dysfunction in your senior loved one, the fact remains that dealing with the symptoms can be difficult and present many challenges.

Notes:

COPING WITH COGNITIVE PROBLEMS

Caring for an older parent can be a difficult responsibility. When you add in the symptoms of increasing forgetfulness and absent-minded behavior, the caregiving you're providing can become a more daunting and challenging task. Of course consulting a doctor and other healthcare professionals to recommend a course of treatment is the obvious first step, but there are many things you can do to help your parent:

- **Have them write down every new piece of information.** A small notebook that they can keep in a purse or pocket would be handy to have at doctor's appointments or by the phone. Encourage them to use both words and pictures if it helps them understand or remember the concepts later on.
- **Let them know that it's OK to ask someone to repeat something.** You loved one may not ask people to repeat information because they don't want to appear silly or inept.
- **Sticky notes are very helpful to leave small reminders.** For example, if they forget how to use the coffee machine, write the instructions down on a note and stick it right on the machine.
- **You can also help your parents improve their cognitive function through two forms of exercise – mental and physical.** Just like muscles, the more your parents exercise their brains, the more they'll be able to better process and remember information.



Novelty and sensory stimulation are the foundation of **brain exercise**. If your parent has a regular route through the grocery store or to the mailbox, ask them to try a different route. If they can't leave the house, suggest a variation in routine such wearing their watch on the opposite wrist.

Health experts also recommend **daily physical activity** in order to reduce the risk of developing cognitive problems. One of the great things about physical activity is that there are so many ways to encourage your senior loved one to be active. Remind them that many physical activities – such as brisk walking or taking the stairs – count as exercise and can be done at any time.

If your senior loved one is confined to a chair for much of the day, try to find ways to encourage movement in his or her daily life. Some examples include leg lifts, grasping a tennis ball or swirling scarves through the air to exercise arm muscles.

Since **stress and anxiety** can increase cognitive dysfunction, it's important that you and your senior loved one stay calm when memory fails. If your parent becomes nervous every time he or she can't remember something, quietly assure them that some memory loss is normal and perhaps they'll remember it later on. One thing that you and your family and friends might ask is how to best communicate with a cognitively impaired loved one. The **National Institute on Aging** has developed a list of recommendations:

- Try to address the person directly and use simple, direct wording.
- Gain the person's attention.
- Speak distinctly and at a natural rate of speed.
- Explain or re-explain who you are and why you are there.
- Support and reassure the person. Acknowledge when responses are correct and if the person gropes for a word, gently provide assistance.
- Present one question, instruction, or statement at a time.

It's likely that both you and your senior loved one will need support from family and friends. Be sure to ask if they can offer some assistance such as helping around the house or simply taking time to visit so that you can tend to your own matters.

Notes:

TAKING ACTION

Caring for a family member experiencing memory loss or dementia can be physically and emotionally wearing. By attending this workshop, you've taken an important step to becoming informed and finding ways to help.

Think about your next steps, and how you can create your own action plan:

1. My personal deadline for assessing the signs of cognitive changes is:
2. Resources I need to search, talk to, or meet with to help me understand the symptoms and issues related to cognitive dysfunction are:
3. The strategies I can try to help my loved one cope with cognitive impairment are:

Action plan:
