



Care Partner Information

Tips for Providing Older Adult Care

Dementia in Different Cultures and Ethnic Groups

Dementia refers to many diseases that cause changes in a person's memory, behavior, and thinking. Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia, but there are several other types, too.

Different Groups May Have Higher Rates of Dementia

Anyone can get dementia, but some groups are at higher risk than others. In the US, African-Americans and Latinos have higher rates of diabetes and heart disease. These conditions increase the risk of dementia. In fact, the rate of dementia in African-Americans and Latinos is almost twice as high as in non-Hispanic whites.

Different Groups May Have Different Beliefs About Dementia

A person's culture includes their values, beliefs, traditions, and language. It also includes the people they socialize with. Depending on a person's culture, they may have different beliefs, traditions, and ways of providing support to a person with dementia. This includes individuals from different racial or ethnic groups who may also have different beliefs about dementia.

For example, in some communities, the memory loss of dementia is seen as a mental illness or a form of being crazy. Culturally, it might be seen as a normal part of aging and no one worries about it. Some might consider dementia something to be embarrassed about. Or simply, dementia may be viewed as "God's will." And, others may be more likely to think people with dementia need to take herbal medicines.

In all of the above situations, people may put off seeking medical care, or not seek medical care at all, because they don't think of dementia as a medical problem. This delays getting medical tests that might show that the person doesn't have dementia but instead, has some other condition causing memory loss that could be treated. And, for people who do have some types of dementia, it delays the advanced planning that should be done, like naming someone to help with medical decisions.

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on older adult caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and community health representatives care for older adults. Available in English and Spanish at www.aging.arizona.edu

What Stops People from Finding Out They Have Dementia?

People from some cultures and ethnic groups are less likely to get a diagnosis than others. That's because different beliefs about dementia may lead a person to not get checked if they are having trouble with their memory. They may wait to go to the doctor until the dementia is very advanced. But, there are other reasons people don't go to the doctor, too.

For example, people in some cultures don't even realize that memory loss is the sign of a serious problem like dementia. In other situations, family members and friends don't pay attention to someone's memory loss because the person looks fine. Sometimes, people with memory problems are seeing health providers who don't speak their language, and this makes it hard to talk about concerns about memory loss and other signs of dementia.

What Can You Do?

It is important to identify the signs of memory loss early. If you have an older family member or friend who is showing problems with memory, or who seems confused, or is behaving strangely, consider that dementia might be the cause. These problems, including memory loss, are not normal even in very old people. So, encourage them to go and get checked by their health care provider. The problems might be caused by something other than dementia, and therefore, could be treatable.

It is also important that they go to a doctor who understands their culture and can talk with them, and their family members, about the seriousness of dementia. They should make sure to discuss the person's and family's values and preferences with the doctor, and together they can make treatment decisions. If they do have dementia, they need education and information about the disease, how to deal with it, services available, and what to expect as the dementia gets worse.

Everyone needs to know about the signs and symptoms of dementia and what can be done about it. This will help people cope with the stress and challenges of a disease like dementia, which always gets worse over time.

Resources

Alzheimer's Association: www.alz.org/diversity/overview.asp

Medline Plus, Alzheimer's Disease: <http://medlineplus.gov/alzheimersdisease.html>

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Alzheimer's disease and Related Dementia ~ Care Partner Information

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