

Something's not right. Now what?

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You're going about your day to day when you start to notice something's not right. Maybe this is the third time you've forgotten an appointment. Maybe you've realized you haven't paid your credit card bill for the second month in a row. Or maybe none of that...you feel that you've been doing great but someone you love has approached you and told you they have concerns about your memory. No matter who you are or how prepared you are, this conversation is a challenging one. Yet, so many families are dealing with the reality that they themselves or their loved ones might be experiencing some cognitive changes. So what next?

I've found that there are a couple of paths that families typically take. The first is to do nothing. They might brush off changes and chalk them up to old age. Until a major change or unfortunately, more often a crisis, they are not reacting. The second is to do something. Some families might encourage their loved one to start eating better, see their doctor, and trust that they will take care of themselves. While this is better than the first alternative, it often leaves a couple of gaping holes where better preparation and support could have fit in nicely. Which brings us to our third path – where families walk side by side with their loved one through the changes they may be experiencing. Although it's never easy, this path allows families to be informed and help their loved one seek a geriatrician/neurologist who specializes in assessing cognitive changes. They can then seek guidance on how to best support their loved one while maintaining and respecting their independence. Perhaps the most important factor is that

Diagnosis of a disease is key to learning about treatment, progression, and next steps. Yet, so often, when it comes to diagnosing types of dementia, the process falls a little short. Many times from the families I've worked with, I hear that their loved one was diagnosed with dementia. What they might not realize is that dementia itself is not a diagnosis. Rather, it is an umbrella term of the symptoms – confusion, forgetfulness, and communication impairments. While it may be easy to clearly see signs of dementia present, doctors have more difficulty in defining what type of dementia their loved one may have.

You may be wondering why a specific diagnosis matters so much. Because there are many different causes and forms of dementia, it is helpful for families to understand what they are up against. While Alzheimer's disease makes up most of the dementia diagnoses (about 60-80% of the total), there are many other forms of dementia that are similar in nature, yet different in progression. Vascular dementia, another common form of dementia, is marked by presence of stroke damage and typically begins with symptoms of impaired judgment and reasoning. Dementia with Lewy bodies usually has symptoms of hallucinations, sleep disruptions, and muscle rigidity. While there are similarities in each form of dementia, knowing the differences in what to expect can make such a better outlook for families helping their loved one.

Besides the differences in forms of dementia, there are also some forms of reversible dementia. While not as commonly diagnosed as other forms of dementia such as Alzheimer's disease, these reversible forms of dementia can be caused by various issues, and when addressed, can put a stop to many symptoms including forgetfulness and confusion. Some of the causes of reversible dementia are medication interactions, thyroid

problems, depression, or vitamin deficiencies. Assessment by a specialist, such as a geriatric physician or neurologist can make the difference in an accurate diagnosis. Unfortunately, the process of getting an accurate diagnosis can be time consuming and costly. However, getting as much information as possible about what your family might be facing can help plan for what is to come. Knowing is half the battle.

For more information about Memory Moment articles & Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness, check out their website at www.effinghamalz.org. If you are a caregiver & have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free to call Shannon Nobsich at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.