

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 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. Diagnosis of a disease is key to learning about treatment, progression, and next steps. 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. 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.

Besides the differences in forms of dementia, there are also some health issues that mimic dementia. While not as commonly diagnosed as other forms of dementia such as Alzheimer's disease, these

reversible health issues can be addressed, with the proper treatment, and put a stop to many symptoms including forgetfulness and confusion. Some of the causes of reversible dementia are medication interactions, thyroid problems, depression, infections, dehydration, or vitamin deficiencies. Assessment by a specialist, such as a geriatric physician or neurologist can make the difference in an accurate diagnosis.

After this, families 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 they can begin planning for the future. This includes completing power of attorney documents and advance directives as well as figuring out what is important to your loved one as they age and encounter more health-related challenges. Again, while these conversations can be challenging, the families who set forth on the third path, to walk with their loved one side by side, are more prepared and confident to handle whatever the coming years bring. In my experience, the families who can be proactive enjoy more meaningful memories and time with their loved one rather than worrying about what should have been done years ago.

Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness (EAAA) is a volunteer-run, not-for-profit organization founded to provide education and support to all families, caregivers, and people with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia in Effingham County and the surrounding area. For more information about Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness, check out the 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 Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.