

Dementia & Alzheimer's – What's the difference?

By: Amy Sobrino, MSW

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 I have heard from the families I've worked with 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. Early diagnosis of dementia can help ensure that the person diagnosed can have an active voice in planning for the future. Knowing is half the battle.

For more information about Memory Moment & 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 Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.

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