

Healthy Thoughts: Older Adults and Cognitive Decline

Provided by ERS Parish Health Ministry

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“Now we see indistinctly...then we shall see face to face.” (1 Corinthians 13:12)

What used to be known as “dementia” is now called “Neurocognitive Disorder” by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). A neurocognitive disorder is a condition in which an individual experiences a significant decline from their previous level of functioning in one or more areas such as: concentration, memory, language, reasoning, problem-solving, judgment or perception with the decline causing problems in independent living.¹

What this may look like: Although different depending on the person, cause, and severity, the following may be seen in those who have a neurocognitive disorder: problems maintaining their focus/attention; becoming easily distracted; inability to recall where they placed things or what they were going to do; getting lost in familiar places; not remembering something that just happened hours or days beforehand; repeating themselves; leaving the stove on; forgetting appointments or to take their medicine; calling things by the wrong names or not being able to think of words to use; not understanding what is said; difficulty comprehending how things work (e.g., microwave, lawnmower, TV remote, tools); using poor judgment (e.g., letting a stranger in the house, making inappropriate comments, making unwise purchases or decisions); getting into car accidents (e.g., not able to judge distances, not obeying traffic laws).

Depending on the type of neurocognitive disorder, the individual may also experience changes in their personality, mood, or reality-testing (e.g., a once gentle person becomes agitated; a once upbeat person becomes depressed or anxious; the individual begins to see things that aren't really there or becomes paranoid, accusing loved ones of outrageous doings).

Cause, course, and treatment: The first point to remember is that persons with a neuro-cognitive disorder do not bring this on themselves (i.e., they are not intentionally forgetting to do something or ignoring someone who is speaking to them). There are many possible causes of these conditions, including: Alzheimer's disease, Lewy body disease, Parkinson's disease, stroke or vascular problems, traumatic brain injuries, alcohol/drugs/medications, and serious infections, to name a few. The course of the disease will look different depending on the cause or severity of injury. Some neurocognitive disorders are considered “progressive” (e.g., Alzheimer's, Lewy

body) meaning they will worsen over time (although medications do exist that can help to slow the rate of decline). For others such as stroke or traumatic brain injury, recovery can range from none to full.

What to do: If you suspect that you or someone you love has a neurocognitive disorder, the first step is to see the doctor, as some illnesses can resemble these disorders, but be readily treated (e.g., delirium, depression). The physician may refer you or your loved one to a neuropsychologist who can do testing, or to a neurologist who can order brain imaging to better assess the situation. If a neurocognitive disorder is diagnosed, a plan can be put in place with the help of healthcare providers to ensure that needs are being met and safety is maintained. Also, if the condition is determined to be progressive, try to help the person see the gifts amidst the Cross such as time to see loved ones, travel, ask for forgiveness and to forgive, make amends, express love, arrange final business, and consider a relationship with the Lord.

For more information: Eldercare Locator: eldercare.gov or 1 (800) 677-1116; Alzheimer's Association: alz.org or 1 (800) 272-3900 (24-hour Helpline)

Source: ¹DSM-5, APA, 2013.



The Parish Health Ministry at St. Gertrude Church partners with Episcopal Retirement Services (ERS) on various health and wellness initiatives. ERS is a not-for-profit organization committed to enriching the lives of older adults in a person-centered, innovative, spiritually based way. ERS serves seniors in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana through residential communities, affordable housing, and in-home services. For more information, please visit EpiscopalRetirement.com or call (800) 835-5768.

