When Does Normal Forgetfulness become Dementia?
By Amanda Alexander, MSW

> The preacher came to call the other day. He said that at my age, I should be thinking about the hereafter. I told him, "Oh, I do that all the time. No matter where I am: in the living room, upstairs, in the kitchen, or down in the basement, I ask myself, now what am I hereafter?"

How often those of us past 40 hear jokes like this or make them ourselves. Laughing just to keep from crying, it seems sometimes. As a geriatric care manager I regularly hear concerned children or spouses ask, "Do you think Mom/Dad has Alzheimer's? He called me by the dog's name again…" or "My wife never used to forget her 2nd cousin's birthday…"

In the past 10 years our medically hyper-vigilant American culture has been inundated with information about the onset of Alzheimer's, dementia, and senility. We are convinced that the least sign of forgetfulness means that we will be sent off to a facility never to be seen again. We worry that our lapses of memory will cause us embarrassment, create burden on our spouses and children, or turn us into people we no longer recognize. Some of these fears are grounded in reality, but many are not. So how can we know when normal forgetfulness is just that, and not a precursor to a more significant disease?

Forgetfulness vs. Dementia

As we age, brain functions begin to slow down, causing a time delay in remembering things. It takes more concentrated effort to recall where you put the car keys or what the neighbor's name is. Although frustrating and occasionally mortifying, this is a normal and natural process of aging. You are aware that you have these momentary lapses of memory and are able to lightly acknowledge them. However, when those lapses of memory begin to be more frequent, or if you are not even aware that you have forgotten something important, then the possibility of true dementia becomes more likely. A person with dementia, including Alzheimer's, may feel that something is wrong, but is not sure what. Or, the person may not be aware at all that he has memory lapses, and will behave as if everything is fine.

More significantly, those with dementia gradually lose their ability to perform daily activities. The minor inconvenience of forgetting a name or item on your to-do list is supplanted by the life-altering inability to make good judgments, perform abstract thinking processes, and communicate coherently.

The table below describes the difference between behaviors of a person with dementia versus a normal adult with memory lapses.

The difference between normal forgetfulness and dementia		
Description	**Person with dementia**	**'Normal' older adult**
Forgets	whole experience	parts of an experience
Forgets words or names for things or objects	progressive	occasional (tip-of-the-tongue)
Delayed recall of names	often	rarely
Follows written or verbal directions	gradually unable	usually able
Ability to use notes, reminders, cues from environment	gradually unable	usually able
Follow a story on TV, in a movie or in a book	gradually loses ability	usually able
Calculations	gradually loses ability	may be slower than before
Self-care capacity (dressing, bathing, cooking etc.)	gradually unable	usually able

Symptoms of Dementia

If you feel that someone you know may have true dementia, here are some of the signs of Alzheimer's Disease as prepared by the Alzheimer's Association:

1. Memory loss of recent events
2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks
3. Problems with language
4. Disorientation to time and place
5. Poor or decreased judgment
6. Problems with abstract thinking
7. Misplacing things
8. Changes in mood or behavior
9. Changes in personality
10. Loss of initiative

Tips on Keeping your Memory Sharp

Many baby-boomers are aware that there are things they can do to improve and maintain your memory. Brain exercises like sudoku and word games abound on the internet. In addition, here are some other strategies that may help prevent the "what am I hereafter" syndrome:

- **Challenge yourself.** Read widely. Keeping mentally active by learning new skills.
- **Relax.** Tension may prolong a memory lapse.
- **Pay attention.** Concentrate on what you want to remember.
- **Minimize and restrict distractions.**
- **Take your time.** Slow down, allow yourself to breathe, and trust that you will be able to recall what you need. Build more time into your day to do small tasks.
- **Organize belongings.** Designate a place for keys, watch, wallet.
- **Repeat names of new acquaintances in conversation.**
- **Use a notepad and carry a calendar.** This may not keep your memory sharp, but will compensate for memory problems.

Resources

Memory loss and dementia is a terrifying event, but you are not alone in your challenge. If you think that someone you know may have some significant memory loss, there are many resources in our community to help educate, support, and advocate for the individual:

Alzheimer's Association, WNC chapter- 254-7363
Alzheimers 24 hour hotline, run by the Alzheimer's Association- 800-272-3900
Memory Care—A non-profit organization providing services to older adults with memory loss- 771-2219
Geriatric Care Managers- Trained professionals who assist families and their aging loved ones with the myriad challenges of growing older. Provide crisis management, resourcing, end of life planning, and more. www.caremanager.org.

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