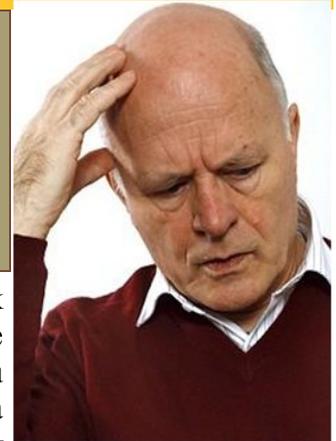


# Senior Minutes

*In Search of Excellence for Clinical and Management Issues*

## Losing A Loved One to Dementia/Alzheimer's Disease



Usually when we talk about bereavement, we're talking about the period of time when we grieve the loss of someone we love after he/she has died. But bereavement also happens when we lose someone we love while he/she is still physically here and alive. It happens when our loved one suffers from dementia or even more devastating, Alzheimer's disease.

You begin noticing the progressively deteriorating symptoms:

- frequently forgetting information just learned
- confusion when playing a board/card game
- slow to verbalize well-known words
- getting lost in familiar places
- forgetting to eat meals
- dressing inappropriately weather-wise
- frequent mood swings
- doing odd things, such as putting the milk into the dryer instead of the refrigerator

Then you face the situations that simply break your heart:

Mom no longer knows who you are when you stop in to visit.

Dad asks you where you work. You say, "The post office," and he replies, "I once had a daughter who worked for the post office."

You visit Mom at her long-term care facility. You ask her how the staff is treating her, and she says, "I don't know. How do they treat you?"

Dad thinks you're his new girlfriend and he puts his hand on your thigh, as he rides in the passenger seat next to you in the car.

Heart-breaking. You look into the wrinkled face of the person you love and all you see in her eyes is a "vacancy" sign. An empty shell. The once-doting mother now totally disconnected from everyone she holds dear. Someone pushed the delete button and a lifetime of memories vanished from the monitor. No recollection of grandchildren, anniversaries, your departed Dad, or even childhood pets. It's all gone. A thief broke in and stole her dignity and her mind.

Dealing with her death would be easier than this! There are days when you're tempted to pray mightily that the end would come soon. Saying goodbye is never easy. But it helps when it happens quickly. It's agony when it drags out over a long period of time, and you watch someone you love slowly lose her senses and slip away.

Over time your spirit and your stamina will become sapped. If you experience a number of the behaviors listed below, please seek professional counseling:

- Continuous depressed or irritable mood
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
- Suicidal thinking or attempts
- Motor retardation or agitation
- Disturbed sleep
- Fatigue and loss of energy
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities
- Difficulty thinking or concentrating
- Changes in appetite and weight

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**Losing a Loved One To  
Dementia/Alzheimer's Disease (Cont.)**

If you're normal you will probably find yourself experiencing the behavior listed below. Again, this is normal, and there is no need to be alarmed about this behavior.

- You feel as if you have to do it all yourself, and that you should be doing more
- You withdraw from family, friends and activities that you used to enjoy
- You worry that the person you care for is safe
- You feel grief or sadness that your relationship with the person isn't what it used to be
- You get frustrated and angry when the person with dementia continually repeats things and doesn't seem to listen

**Let's face it. What you're up against is formidable.**

How do you cope? Simply by making up your mind to accept the inevitable. And that's not easy.

If you're a religious person, lean on God. You will need him for help and you'll find yourself yelling at him. (He has big shoulders. He can take it. But finally humble yourself under him, live in his forgiveness, and follow his lead.)

Forget about your own life and give up any hopes for future improvement in your loved one's health as long as you're a caregiver. Hope will sour your soul. Daily disappointment will destroy you. You must take life one day at a time and not expect it to get better. There's no "and they lived happily ever after" with this disease. Do what you can to provide your loved one with the best quality of life.

Don't expect to be placed on a pedestal for being the caregiver, and don't accept being blamed for not being able to stay awake 24/7. You're one person doing the job of 9 people. Your satisfaction is to know you gave your loved one the best and most comfortable end of life that you could.

Don't expect people to ever understand what you're going through, unless they have gone through it themselves. It's important for you to find and attend a support group where you can talk with others who know exactly what you're experiencing. There are plenty of them out there. Ask your doctor about a group in your area or get help from the Alzheimer's Association. ([www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org))

Stay strong and never give up. The effort is worth it to see that your loved one is comfortable, safe, cared for, and loved. You will not come out of the experience the same person that you went into it. You will be a better person. (Maybe that's why God got you involved.)

This article is one of a series included in a "Resource Manual for Bereavement in Long-Term Care" created, published, and copyrighted by **Senior PsychCare**. To receive the complete manual, call 713-850-0049, ext. 232.