

Understand the options on dementia health care

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Comedian and TV host Ellen DeGeneres once quipped, "My grandmother started walking five miles a day when she was 60. She's 97 now, and we don't know where the heck she is."

She was kidding, of course, but like all great comedians she was expressing a hard universal truth through humor, with this particular comedic delivery about the process of aging. Speaking more seriously, we have a shared concern for our parents' health and well-being as they get older and become less able to do the things they used to do, less independent and more reliant on care-giving by family, friends and others.

Such concern often extends to elderly aunts and uncles, to other seniors we know in the community, and to ourselves as well, as we wonder what the difference is between aging-related forgetfulness, such as misplacing your car keys, and serious mental decline, such as not remembering which car is yours or that you even own one.

In situations where dementia is diagnosed, how do we best care for a loved one if we are unable to spend every waking moment with that person? Are there strategies to prevent putting a loved one in a nursing home or assisted living residence?

The first thing to do is to ensure your loved one is getting the right care.

The process should include a complete neurological assessment so that you can get a better handle on the type of dementia involved, its progression and the long-term prognosis.

The next step is trying to put resources in place to support your loved one. The majority of long term care in this country is actually provided by families who are caring for loved ones to keep them home as long as possible. It is important for caregivers to take advantage of supportive services to avoid emotional and physical exhaustion.

A report published by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation indicates that caregivers, especially those caring for someone with dementia, experience physical and mental health stresses at a higher rate than

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the general adult population and their health status shows classic symptoms of stress. Taking advantage of community resources, including adult day health care, is vital to avoid burnout and ease the isolation experienced by many caregivers.

Dementia is a general term for memory loss and a decline in other thinking skills severe enough to interfere with daily life, caused by physical changes in the brain. The effects of dementia are progressive, with symptoms worsening over time. The most common type of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, accounting for 60 to 80 percent of cases, some of which are younger-onset among people in their 40s and 50s, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

While the brain and its 100 billion neurons are not yet fully understood, researchers know that the human mind has plasticity -- it can rewire itself and brain function can improve, or at least the decline in cognitive function can be slowed. So ensuring that your loved one is using their brain, through activities such as doing puzzles and reading books, even learning a new foreign language, can likely help slow the progression of the disease.

Other studies show that diet can be central to brain health, specifically the Mediterranean diet that is rich in fish, fruits and vegetables. Researchers have found this diet may slow cognitive decline in older adults and reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease. Exercise and heart health also may have a positive role in dementia prevention.

If living at home is too unsafe because of cognitive issues, options include assisted living in a residence that has a focus on dementia care. Nursing homes sometime become necessary for those with advanced dementia, but even still, residents seem to do well with frequent family visits and plenty of activity, such as listening to live music and singing along or pet therapy.

Specialized memory loss programs available through community-based adult day health care providers can make a major difference in maintaining thinking skills and function. In these programs, dedicated staff provide specialized care in safe settings with a combination of activity rooms and private quiet spaces, along with activities and sensory experiences that improve well-being and reduce depression. They also help prevent caregiver burnout for family members who may be juggling full-time jobs while caring for a parent. Loved ones with dementia can remain living at home but be dropped off or utilize transportation associated with the adult day health center.

It's important to remember that you are not alone. Resources are available. Speak with a physician. Reach out to community resources such as a specialized dementia adult day health program, or by calling AgeInfo, a guide to Massachusetts elder services. Ask for help.

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