

AGING *with an Attitude*

Forgetfulness: Natural Aging or Early Onset of Dementia?



By Dorie U. Sugay

Dorie Sugay is the Executive Director of Visiting Angels, a company that provides living-assistance services to seniors and adults-in-need who wish to stay in their own home or receive one-on-one care within a facility.

Over the holidays, you were rushing everywhere. When you finished shopping, you stood in the parking lot, trying to recall where you parked your car. You retraced your steps and still, your mind was blank. It's probably just brain overload but the incident in the parking lot was not the first so secretly you asked yourself - is this natural for someone over 50? The thought gave you the chills but you soon forget your concerns, as your car came into view.

Kathy, one of our youngest client comes to mind. Two years before, she called her husband — she could not find her way home. Her husband, thinking that perhaps she had too many cocktails at a company function, picked her up and never said a word about it. Months later she called home crying, she again couldn't find her way home. She was just 5 blocks away. A high-level executive for a major computer manufacturer, she figured it was just "brain overload." but at the early age of 40, she found that she could no longer work or even communicate. She was diagnosed with advanced stage dementia.

So what is the difference between forgetfulness and the early onset of dementia? Our memory changes as we age. As a person ages it's more difficult to memorize lists, to multi-task, to acquire new knowledge. It seems that after 40, there isn't one person who has not forgotten where their keys are, or where they left their cell phone. Even those in their 30s talk about rushing to the kitchen and forgetting what they went there to get. Brain overload is often the culprit in these incidents, but in Kathy's case, it wasn't just brain overload. She forgot how to get home and she was not drunk, not on medication, nor did she have any known medical condition that could have affected her memory.

We must remember that our brain naturally allows us to forget some things so that we can make room for other data we wish to remember. It is about what we used to know and remember then forgot, rather than how much we remember. At

its early stages, dementia may seem like simple forgetfulness. Mom gropes for the right word for an umbrella or dad asks you the same question you have answered three times within the last hour. When you forget where you bought that pair of boots, where you filed a document, your son's phone number — these could be caused by things other than dementia. But when someone stares at those "leather things" (leather boots), and can't recall what they are for, or forgets what a passport is, or how to use the phone, that person should be checked for dementia.

One who is aging normally may forget to go take a shower but not forget what the room with "knobs" is for. It is normal for an aging adult to calculate numbers more slowly than when they were young but not to gradually forget how to work with numbers. An aging adult may need help with self-care because their arms feel stiff or they can't bend to dry themselves but not forget how to dress, bathe, brush their teeth, etc. — these suggest dementia past its early stage. Dementia is a loss of mental abilities that causes problem with one's daily activities. It is not a normal part of aging.

Glitches in our memory come up as we age, but they usually won't seriously affect our ability to perform our day-to-day tasks that cannot be explained by another medical condition. Dementia also affects not just the memory but at least one other cognitive area: executive function (the ability to plan), visual-spatial orientation (a sense of space), language and reasoning. Sometimes the symptoms are

subtle, and all the family observes is a sense of apathy and social withdrawal and hence conclude that Mom or Dad has mild depression. Sometimes the symptoms are obvious. Fronto-temporal dementia, for example, comes on very quickly and usually involves personality changes and a lack of inhibition.

High blood pressure, prescription drugs, poor nutrition, low blood sugar, depression, anxiety, lack of sleep, too much sleep, lack of activity and stress have been known to affect memory. Just because you don't show signs of dementia does not mean you should ignore signs of forgetfulness. If you are only 40 and you forget so much your 70 year old mother teases you that she has better memory, this is abnormal — you need to get checked! If you have a medical condition that could affect memory when not managed, or your reaction to medications is severe, call the doctor. Your doctor should be more than pleased to help you assess what is causing "abnormal" loss of memory.

I learned the hard way. Years ago, I ignored headaches and signs of memory loss. "It's just stress," I used to tell myself, as if that meant it is alright. I was rushed to the hospital one day - my blood pressure reached dangerous levels. It was unwise to ignore the symptoms and not listen to my internal voice tipping me that it was not "just stress." I was very lucky to have gotten medical attention when I did. (A major lifestyle change gives my story a happy ending but the issue could have been avoided).

If you have dementia and it is treatable, early diagnosis will allow for better preservation of your brain function. If it is untreatable, early diagnosis will allow you to get on medication that could slow down the progression of dementia. You can't go wrong with early diagnosis, but you can find yourself dealing with more problems if you wait! Early diagnosis is the key to managing it. We have worked with many dementia patients — we have seen how well some clients have responded to treatment and lifestyle changes.

If you are concerned about memory loss, don't mess around — see a doctor. Remember — you only have one brain. Take care of it and it will take care of you!

Sources:

Forgetfulness versus dementia by A. Holley, M.D. Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia vs. Normal Memory Changes, Los Angeles Caregiver Resource Center Normal Older Adult Forgetfulness vs Dementia, myDr.com.au

Disclaimer: This article is for informational purpose only. Anyone with concerns is encouraged to have a discussion with their physician. This article was written independent of Visiting Angels and the magazine.



(In Historical Downtown Gilroy off Monterey Street)

Office Space Available



60 West Fifth Street
Gilroy, CA 95020

SCOTT LYNCH

408.761.1330

www.thePixleyhouse.com
for full-time, part-time, and traveling professionals