

Home Care for People with Dementia

Learn how to distinguish the cognitive changes associated with “normal aging” from those that may signal Alzheimer’s. Also, discover how professional home care providers handle issues that arise from taking care of an elder with dementia.

Normal Aging or Alzheimer’s: What’s the Difference?

As a loved one ages, one of the questions that may come up for you and your family is how to tell the difference between the cognitive changes associated with “normal aging” and those that could signal serious underlying health conditions, such as Alzheimer’s or other forms of dementia.

At this time, there’s no definite way to distinguish between benign memory slips and full-blown dementia, but consider this as a general rule of thumb: occasionally misplacing the car keys is normal, while forgetting what to do with them is not.

Here are a few additional indicators that your loved one’s cognitive troubles may be caused by something more serious than the simple advancing of age:

7 Cognitive Concerns That May Be More Than ‘Old Age’

1. Bad judgement (poor financial decisions, public outbursts)
2. Movement issues (stiff movements, hunched posture)
3. Loss of inhibition (saying or doing socially inappropriate things)
4. Language problems (can’t form coherent sentences)
5. Hallucinations and delusions (seeing things that aren’t really there)
6. Trouble performing familiar tasks (can’t remember how to get to the doctor’s office)
7. Memory loss that interrupts daily life (regularly forgets recent conversations)

Ultimately, it’s up to you and your family to determine if (and when) a loved one’s cognitive issues warrant investigation by a medical professional.

Providing care at home is often one of the best ways to keep a loved one with dementia calm and happy because a regular routine and a familiar environment is less likely to cause confusion and anxiety in those with cognitive impairment. However, since dementia care can be an arduous undertaking for family caregivers, you may eventually need to seek out a professional caregiver to provide respite or even full-time care.

Home Care Considerations for People with Dementia

Since more and more aging adults are being diagnosed with dementia, the number of professional caregivers who are trained to handle people with cognitive impairment is ever increasing.

A 2012 MetLife survey discovered 68 percent of home care companies provide specific training on Alzheimer's to their caregiver employees. This training differs from agency to agency, but typically touches on topics such as how to deal with hallucinations and dementia-related behaviors, as well as strategies for keeping a cognitively challenged individual safe and mentally stimulated.

To exercise an elder's mind and lift their spirits, a professional caregiver will often create special activities based on the senior's specific hobbies and interests.

Art and music are effective forms of therapeutic engagement that can spark memories and emotions in an individual with dementia, no matter which stage they are in. A professional caregiver may have an individual who has been affected by dementia listen to their favorite song, or provide them with art supplies, actions which can ignite seemingly miraculous responses even in those who can't recall their own names.

With family's permission, a professional caregiver may also be able to take an elder with dementia out to a local museum, park or zoo to spark engagement.

Should an elder's condition progress to the point where they need more intensive care, a home care provider may also be able to help facilitate a transfer to an assisted living community or skilled nursing facility. Such transitions can be difficult, which is why it can be beneficial to have help of a professional who has experience with such moves.

Handling Home Care on an Ongoing Basis

Learn what to expect out of a typical home care experience, as well as strategies for addressing common issues that can arise, such as how to help a loved one get used to a new caregiver and how to figure out if a caregiver is doing their job properly.

Preparing for the Initial Visit

Each home care provider, whether an agency or an independent caregiver, will have their own particular method for learning about their elderly clients' needs and creating a care plan that provides the proper amount of assistance.

Most agencies send someone out prior to the start of care to determine the type of assistance a senior needs and to get a feel for their personality. One benefit of working with an agency is that they have processes in place to ensure that an elder is matched with the right care team. If an agency caregiver doesn't appear to be a good personality fit for an elder, it's easy for the supervisor overseeing that senior's care to find a replacement. Hiring an independent caregiver typically doesn't offer this level of flexibility.

One way you, as a family member, can facilitate the critical knowledge gathering process is by being prepared to answer questions about your loved one's health conditions, care needs, likes and dislikes.

A printable worksheet at the end of this reading outlines some of the important information to have on hand about your loved one when you first meet the individual in charge of overseeing their care.

Helping a Senior Adjust to a New Caregiver

While it would be wonderful if your loved one and their caregiver hit it off right away, this isn't often the case. The relationship between a professional caregiver and an elder is one

that must be grounded in trust and gradually strengthened over time.

The home care provider you select should take the time to get to know your loved one and ensure that the men and women who will be looking after them have compatible personalities. In addition to getting to know their core group of caregivers, your loved one should also have the opportunity to develop at least a basic rapport with the substitutes who fill in whenever a regularly-scheduled caregiver is unable to.

You can facilitate the relationship building process by listening to your loved one's thoughts and feedback about their caregivers, and informing the care advisor if you feel a certain match-up isn't working.

Once these connections click into place, the resistance your loved one has to accepting an outsider into their home should diminish significantly. They may even begin to look forward to visits from their caregivers.

What to Expect on the First Day

What actually happens on that first official day of home care? This pivotal encounter has four distinct stages: the introduction, the discussion, the tour and the follow-up.

The Introduction

If you're dealing with a home care agency, chances are that the caregiver won't show up on your doorstep solo. They will probably be accompanied by the care supervisor that the family (and possibly the senior themselves) has already had contact with.

Agencies often do this because seeing a friendly face can ease tension and pave the way for a more honest, friendly first meeting between your loved one and their new caregiver.

Building Trust through Discussion

Once introductions have been made, you (and your loved one, if they are cognitively capable of understanding) will sit down with the professional caregiver and the care supervisor to review the care plan.

While the care plan will typically have been fleshed out prior to the first time a caregiver comes to look after an elder, it's important to go over it again-just to make sure everyone understands what the caregiver will be responsible for doing. Also, because a senior's needs

are always changing, the plan may require revision.

After the agenda has been fully discussed and vetted, the care coordinator will typically bow out (after they've made sure you know how to get in touch with them), leaving you and your loved one alone with the professional caregiver for the first time.

The first day is mainly about building a relationship between the care provider and the senior they're going to be looking after; finding common ground and developing a connection should be the first priorities.

If your loved one is cognitively capable of responding, the professional caregiver may ask them some questions to get to know them better: What are your hobbies? How many children do you have? What's your favorite meal?

The caregiver may also share a bit of background about themselves, their training and why they decided to enter the professional care field.

Taking the Tour

Next, you and your loved one will take the new caregiver on a tour of the house, showing them around and familiarizing them with the location of important rooms and items.

What happens next generally depends on what the caregiver has been hired to do.

If the caregiver is there for a short time to help out with laundry

Important Information to Tell a Home Care Provider

Weekly Schedule

Health Conditions: Check all that apply

- Alzheimer's/ Dementia
- Arthritis
- Cancer
- Cataracts
- COPD
- Diabetes
- Depression
- Heart Disease
- HIV/AIDS
- Incontinence
- Kidney Disease
- Lung Disease
- Osteoporosis
- Parkinson's Disease
- Stroke
- Thyroid Condition
- Sleep Disorder (please describe):
- Other:

Medications: List all the medications your loved one takes, including dosage and frequency:

Does your loved one have any dietary restrictions? If so, please describe:

List your loved one's hobbies and interests:

Describe any other likes, dislikes, etc. that you feel the person taking care of your loved one should know.
