

The Myth of Denial... Understanding Anosognosia

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“Things would be much simpler if only mom wasn’t in denial.” This is a statement we hear commonly from care partners. Maybe mom has been diagnosed with dementia but thinks there’s nothing wrong with her. Or dad is having increasing difficulty with driving but believes that he is still fully capable on the roads.

There is no doubt that a lack of understanding or acceptance of the diagnosis of dementia can cause extra challenges. In these cases, the person with dementia often resists help or support services because she doesn’t recognize the changes in her cognition and abilities.

But assuming the person is in denial is often an inappropriate assumption. Of course, some people who are diagnosed with dementia may go through a period of denial, just as their family members might. Receiving this news is upsetting and each individual will need time to understand and accept it. But for some people with dementia, the lack of insight or acceptance is not simply denial. Rather it is a specific phenomenon of dementia called Anosognosia.

Anosognosia is variously defined as “ignorance of illness” or “lack of insight or awareness.” Anosognosia is a result of changes in the brain which interfere with the individual’s ability to recognize his or her cognitive impairment. A person with anosognosia may realize that he has some memory loss but not understand the full extent of it. Or he may not realize that he has any memory changes at all. In fact, if asked he might state: “There is nothing wrong with me. My memory is perfect.”

Here’s an example that might help demonstrate this phenomenon. Imagine I asked you what time my doctor’s appointment is tomorrow and you told me 2:00. I might even repeat this information back to you so you knew that I had understood. If my short-term memory is working properly, I would store this information and be able to retrieve it as needed. Tomorrow I would be able to show up at my appointment on time.

If my short-term memory is not working properly, I can’t store the information and as a result I can’t retrieve it when needed. It’s like one of those erasable etch-a-sketch toys that you might have had as a child. The screen gets wiped clean. So I might ask you again – what time is my doctor’s appointment? Over a short period of time, I might repeat this question multiple times.

This type of repetitive question is very common in dementia. And it can be a source of frustration for the person with dementia as well as their care partners. You might finally say to me: “How can you say you don’t have a memory problem? That’s the fifth time you asked me about your doctor’s appointment in the last half hour.”

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The problem is that because of how my brain is functioning, I may not be able to understand what is happening to me. Some people with dementia will remember that they had some information in the first

place. So, for example, I might remember that I asked you what time my appointment was but not the answer you gave me. Other people don't remember any part of the exchange. In that case, each time I ask the question I think it is the first time. Then my response might be: "Don't be ridiculous. I only asked you one simple question."

Anosognosia can be a very challenging part of dementia, but understanding what is happening can make the journey easier. If you would like help understanding dementia, contact our office or visit our website at: www.alzheimer.ca/pklnh.

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