

3 Commonly Misunderstood Dementia Symptoms By: Danielle Vernon, Client Support Coordinator



As a Client Support Coordinator at the Alzheimer Society there are 3 things that I often hear about the behaviours of people with dementia that are frequently misunderstood...

“She is in denial that she has dementia”

Care partners will often tell me that their family member is in denial about their dementia. They explain to me that the person living with dementia gets quite upset when assistance with a task is offered because they don't feel the assistance is necessary. This is often interpreted as denial of their condition. Denial is a refusal to accept or acknowledge something, or admit that it is true. This however requires knowledge that the issue exists in the first place. There is a symptom commonly associated with dementia called anosognosia, which is a loss of ability to recognise illness in oneself. Anosognosia



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is a result of damage to part of the brain that controls reasoning. People with dementia experiencing Anosognosia genuinely lack awareness of their condition and cannot recognise how their functioning is impaired, as understanding this requires the ability to reason. As with any dementia symptom, there is a range in severity and fluctuations will occur. This is why people with dementia may be aware of some of their deficits and completely unaware of others.

“He has been going for very long walks”

When I talk to people about the importance of daily activity for brain health, I will often be told by care partners that their family member with dementia takes regular walks but more recently the walks can be much longer than usual. This could be a sign that the person is becoming temporarily disoriented during the walk. Even in the early stages of dementia people can become confused about their surroundings. Something as simple as needing to cross the road to avoid construction can disrupt the regular route and set a person with dementia off course; or as I have heard from some people with dementia, they have been walking in a neighbourhood where they have lived for many years and suddenly look around and do not recognise where they are. Dementia can cause changes in the brain that may affect a person’s ability to recognise even familiar environments. Symptoms such as this can fluctuate from moment to moment and the disorientation may only last a short time before the person is able to reorient themselves and return home. This may be what has occurred when a person with dementia has been gone for longer than usual. It is also important to note that due to short term memory loss and varying levels of insight into their own condition, a



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person with dementia may not be able to accurately recount what occurred to cause their delay.

“He never wants to do anything anymore”

Many people supporting a person with dementia will say that they have noticed a distinct decrease in their family member’s motivation to participate in many of the activities they once enjoyed. In dementia care, this is referred to as apathy. Apathy is the loss of ability to initiate activity. I often give the analogy that for some people who look outside and see a beautiful sunny day a little switch turns on in their head that might tell them this would be a good time to go out and do some gardening. For a person with dementia however, the changes that have occurred in their brain result in an inability to turn on the switch by itself. This is where a simple prompt from another person may set the process in action. As dementia progresses the lack of ability to initiate an activity may also combine with problems in short term memory that can affect the success of certain endeavors. For example a care partner may prompt the person to return to a woodworking project, however once started, it will require short term memory to recall plans for next steps in the project, where to find the necessary materials, and the intended vision for the final product. Difficulty with this may cause the person to become frustrated and no longer gain enjoyment from that activity. To help with this care partners may need to participate in the activity as well to provide guidance throughout the process.

If you have questions about behaviour changes associated with dementia symptoms please do not hesitate to call and speak with one of our Client Support Coordinators.



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