

## **Strengthening family bonds during the onset of dementia**

Dementia is life changing for those who are affected and their caregivers. The condition presents their own sets of symptoms as they affect patients.

Dementia is an umbrella term that describes several conditions and diseases that develop when the brain's nerve cells, also known as neurons, fail to function properly or die. These neurons cause changes in a person's memory, ability to think clearly, and overall behaviour.

There are various forms of dementia that come with their own signs and symptoms. Among them are:

- Dementia with Lewy Bodies (DWL)
- Vascular dementia
- Mixed dementia
- Parkinson's disease
- Frontotemporal lobar degeneration (FTLD)
- Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease
- Normal pressure hydrocephalus

The difference between dementia and Alzheimer's disease is that as the brain changes worsen, the person's ability to carry out basic bodily functions as swallowing and walking greatly deteriorate. A progressive disease, it is ultimately fatal.

### **Disease prevalence**

When the first baby boomers reached age 65 in 2011, there was a larger risk for dementia and Alzheimer's. It is expected that by 2030, this segment is expected to double, and 71 million older Americans will make up about 20 percent of the total U.S. population.

The numbers continue to increase. By 2025, the number of people who are age 65 and older and who suffer from Alzheimer's is thought to increase to about 6.7 million. This is a 30 percent increase from the current 5.2 million who are presently affected. Then as those first baby boomers reach age 85 in 2031, there will be an estimated 3.5 million people with dementia and Alzheimer's.

### **Caregivers for dementia**

People with the onset of dementia find that as their mental facilities decline, they feel vulnerable and need support and reassurance. The people who are closest to them—their friends, family, and other carers—do everything possible to help the ill person hold onto the feelings of self-worth and sense of identity.

With progressive diseases such as dementia, the real test of love comes when families face a serious problem. There are the stresses of the care for these patients. For example, more than 15 million American family members, relatives, and friends give unpaid care for dementia patients. In 2011 alone, these individuals gave some 17.4 billion hours of unpaid care, valued at over \$210 billion.

Acting as a caregiver for a dementia patient is difficult, particularly as family members and friends experience the decline of their loved one. They experience high levels of emotional

stress and even depression themselves. Caregiving can cause negative impacts on their own health as well as on their income, family finances, and employment as more and more hours are needed to care for their loved one. The average is 21.9 hours per week for care.

Family relationships can become difficult, especially if there are various views as to how the loved one should be cared for. The trust of each other can be challenged, so there must be ways to strengthen the bonds between family members.

Caregivers should try to involve other family members, so all the responsibility does not rest with them. This can help strengthen family bonds as they become more familiar with the care given to their loved one. They also need to explain to family and friends how dementia will affect the loved one's behaviour.

If they could not offer daily care, they could look after the person while the caregiver has a break. This can be beneficial in strengthening bonds while giving the caregiver support and making them feel more valued.

Family members can also offer some financial assistance if they can toward the cost of the care. Perhaps they can go shopping or do chores such a laundry or some cleaning. Even a walk outdoors or sometime in the garden with or without the caregiver can give a family member a clearer view of their loved one's condition, showing what the caregiver experiences regularly.

Families of dementia and Alzheimer's patients can strengthen their family relationships by communicating with each other. The main caregiver must remember to communicate their needs with their family and friends. They need to also tell their family and friends that they value their support and what a difference it makes to them.