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Association for Dementia and Alzheimer's of South Africa

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Stages of Dementia

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The word 'dementia' describes a group of symptoms that may include memory loss, difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language, and often changes in mood, perception or behaviour. These changes are usually small to start with, but for someone with dementia, they become bad enough to affect daily life. Dementia isn't a natural part of ageing. It occurs when the brain is affected by a disease.

The speed at which dementia progress, varies. Progress is different for the different types of dementia and will also vary from person to person. The clinical progress of dementia is described in 7 stages. This is only a guideline, as the different stages might overlap.

Stages

STAGE 1: NO COGNITIVE DECLINE (loss of mental functions)

The person and their family/friends will not be aware of any changes. However, the structure of the brain might start to change due to nerve cells dying after losing connection with other brain cells. The person can still function normally and shows no signs of memory loss, reasoning, or confusion.

STAGE 2: VERY MILD COGNITIVE DECLINE

The person might experience occasional memory lapses, like forgetting where familiar everyday objects are kept and forgetting names once well-known. At this stage, the symptoms are unlikely to affect the person's work or social interactions. The symptoms may even be too mild to detect in a clinical interview.

STAGE 3: MILD COGNITIVE DECLINE

The loss of mental functions (cognitive decline) becomes more noticeable by family, friends, and colleagues. This may cause anxiety for the person, as their symptoms become apparent, interfering with their ability to function. Symptoms may include some of the following: getting lost while driving/walking in unfamiliar places; losing items of important value; reading something and retaining very little of it; increased difficulty in social settings; having trouble concentrating or performing complex tasks; frequently forgetting words and names of family & friends and poor work performance noticeable by colleagues.

STAGE 4: MODERATE COGNITIVE DECLINE

At this stage, the person may still remember the names and faces of family and friends; able to find their way around familiar places, but they may start to avoid challenging situations in order to prevent anxiety and to hide their distress from others. This stage would show a definitive decline in cognitive ability in a clinical interview.

Symptoms may include some of the following: lack of understanding/knowledge of current or recent events; difficulty remembering parts of their own personal history; organising, planning, traveling, and managing finances become too difficult to manage.

STAGE 5: MODERATELY SEVERE COGNITIVE DECLINE

The person may still remember their name, that of their spouse and children, but could struggle to remember their grandchildren's names. They may be able to eat and use the bathroom without assistance, but choosing an item to wear, for example, could become challenging.

From this stage onwards, the person may no longer be able to function without some assistance. Symptoms may include some of the following: difficulty recalling important details such as their address and phone/cell number; disorientation regarding place, time, season, date or day of week; cannot count backward from 20 by 2's, or from 40 by 4's (provided the person was previously able to do this calculation) and trouble with decision-making ability.

STAGE 6: SEVERE COGNITIVE DECLINE

During this stage, the person is still likely to remember their name and distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar people in their environment. They will probably need assistance with daily routines and may experience incontinence and sleeping difficulties. The person may require a higher degree of care. Symptoms may include some of the following: difficulty remembering names of spouses, children, and primary caregivers; lack of awareness of recent events and experiences in their life, their surroundings as well as time and place; unclear or skewed recollection of early life; difficulty counting forward to and backward from 10; inability to travel alone or without assistance and a tendency to wander off.

The person might experience some of the following emotional and personality changes: Agitation, anxiety, paranoia, hallucinations, and delusional behaviour, some of which can lead to violent outbursts; obsessive behaviour, like constant packing or pacing and cannot complete an everyday task, like putting on a jacket.

STAGE 7: VERY SEVERE COGNITIVE DECLINE

In the final stage, the brain loses communication with the body, making it increasingly difficult to function. The person will lose motor skills as well as the ability to speak. Speech could be limited to unintelligible sounds or words or a complete inability to speak. Assistance will be needed with all personal care and tasks such as eating, walking, and using the bathroom.

Even if your communication is limited to holding the person's hand, warm hugs, friendly smiles, or just being a sunny presence in their company, know that their heart centre will connect with yours, and that is all that is needed at that moment.

(Cognitive decline: a temporary or permanent loss of mental functions, causing forgetfulness, lack of concentration, learning difficulties, and other reductions in effective thinking.)