

Is Memory Loss a Cause for Concern?

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Your loved one has been forgetting things lately - an appointment, where he or she placed their keys, or even a friend's name. Are these memory lapses a sign of normal aging? September is recognized as World Alzheimer's Month. Some 4.5 million Americans suffer from the disease, which affects parts of the brain that control memory and language; however, occasional forgetfulness doesn't always mean someone has Alzheimer's. If it happens regularly though, it could be cause for concern.

If your loved one shows any of these symptoms, schedule an appointment with his or her healthcare provider:

- forgetting things, especially information learned recently
- forgetting common words and using odd words in their place
- asking the same questions repeatedly
- having trouble with everyday tasks
- becoming lost in familiar places
- having sudden, unexplained mood swings or dramatic personality changes
- ignoring personal safety
- regularly repeating the same story, word for word
- struggling to solve simple math problems, pay bills or balance a checkbook
- neglecting to bathe/change clothes
- misplacing items in odd places
- constantly checking or hoarding things of no value

In addition to screening for Alzheimer's, your loved one's provider should also check for other conditions that may cause memory problems, such as drug interactions, fever, dehydration, vitamin deficiency, poor nutrition, thyroid problems and minor head injuries. Stress, anxiety and depression can also make a person forgetful. In these cases, memory loss is temporary and can be improved with proper treatment.

Here are some of my personal tips for keeping a sharp mind:

Keep your mind active. Much of the research now states that it is important for older adults with mental health problems and their caregivers to practice healthy lifestyles that help reduce stress and maintain physical and mental health. Studies show that the effects of aging are minimized by staying mentally alert, intellectually curious, physically active, and socially active. As much as possible, individuals should continue with their daily routines. When these routines become difficult or one can no longer enjoy their past interests, it may be the best time to meet with your physician.

Socialize with friends – especially online! Many older adults keep their minds active with the use of computers. Connecting with friends online through programs like Skype keeps individuals in communication with loved ones who live far away. Local councils on aging also provide a wide variety of free group activities for socialization along with mental stimulation.

Stimulate your brain. Sometimes it is something as simple as a card game or a jig saw puzzle, but the important point is to remember the old adage "use it or lose it." When recently discussing this topic with a group of seniors, one of the seniors related to the topic by remembering how during summer vacation, school children used to never pick up a book - then when they came back to school, they had to start all over. It is the same principal here.

Alzheimer's disease is a common diagnosis in Morton Hospital's Elder Behavioral Health Services Unit (EBHS), which provides a multidisciplinary, integrative approach for treating older adults, age 55 and over, with behavioral, psychiatric or neuropsychiatric difficulties that require hospitalization. Learn more about Morton's EBHS services at www.steward.org/morton.

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