

## Alzheimer's SOS column – Warning Signs



Everyone has age-related memory loss. We forget names, we need reminder notes, and then there's the "hereafter phenomenon" when we walk into a room and ask "What am I here after?"

In dementia, there are more serious warning signs that go beyond these expected changes. A mnemonic we've come up with is "I'M SCARED OF."

**I is for Insight, or lack thereof.** There is no recognition that something has been forgotten, mislaid, or overlooked. People with dementia minimize their symptoms, and insist that nothing is wrong even when there is a glaring problem.

**M is for Medications — mixed up or missing.** The prescription gets lost or doesn't get refilled. Doses are doubled, skipped, or taken at the wrong time. Sometimes, the patient suddenly stops their medication based on increasingly faulty reasoning.

**S is for Safety.** This includes being safe at home, on the phone, and on the Internet. Patients with early dementia often share personal information with the wrong people, resulting in financial exploitation and scams. On the other hand, they may be so protective that they hide money, important papers, and wallets and then can't find them.

**C is for Cleanliness.** The house is superficially tidy but a closer look uncovers that surfaces are dusted but the floor is sticky and the dishwasher is being run by without soap. Personal hygiene slips, and the

same clothes are worn repeatedly. The person may counter direct questions about bathing by saying that they just showered yesterday, they don't do anything to get dirty so why bother, or they react with anger.

**A is for Accusations, Agitation, and Arguments (take your pick).** Paranoia is a hallmark of Alzheimer's dementia, with the patient insisting that someone is "coming in at night and moving things around" rather than realizing that they misplaced something. They will cling to misperceptions and not be convinced by logic. They are literally UN – reason – ABLE.

**R is for Repetition, Repetition, and Repetition.** In dementia, the area of the brain that grabs onto new information and files that away becomes damaged. The patient repeats the same question or statement over and over – each time thinking it's the first time they have brought it up. For example, a son will say, "Mom, we're going to lunch at the inn today." A few minutes later mom asks, "So what are we doing for lunch?" Son repeats, and mom asks again a few minutes later; and a few minutes after that.

**E is for Excuses.** The patient with dementia can come up with a reason that justifies all of their choices, actions, and decisions. One patient got three new debit cards in a month because "the bank kept making mistakes," when actually he had just forgotten that he used the card. Another lady explained that she didn't know the day, month or year because, "they rushed me so I didn't get to read the paper."

**D is for Driving concerns.** People with dementia may forget where they are driving to ("Now where was I going?"), or what route they should take ("Now how do I get there?"). They may show up for an appointment at the wrong office on the wrong day. They may take two hours to arrive at a family member's home 20 minutes away. Getting lost, running out of gas, and misjudging speed or distance are real red flags, as are unexplained "dings" to the car.

**O is for Organization.** People with dementia may have stacks of papers piling up on their desk, table, or countertops. They are too overwhelmed to get the bills paid — especially ones that show up every few months such as insurance invoices. Meanwhile, the ads, charity requests and "confusing" mail keeps coming and nothing gets thrown away.

**F is for Food.** Working with recipes and preparing meals becomes a struggle. Instead, fast food, sandwiches, or snacks start replacing a balanced diet. A minor kitchen fire or close calls because a metal pan was put into the microwave or a paper dish was being heated on the stove are safety issues as well as food issues.

Of all of these warning signs, we find that the earliest problem areas are "bills and pills" — organization of paperwork and medication management. If you are concerned that someone you love is showing early signs of dementia, speak up and get an accurate diagnosis and plan for their care.

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