

The Many Faces of "Cognitive Impairment"

Many people who live in our nursing homes suffer from injuries or diseases that damage the brain. The damage might be temporary, or permanent. Either way, it usually means that the person's ability to think and act is changed.

In medical terms, this condition is referred to as "dementia," or "cognitive impairment." The resident is referred to as being "cognitively impaired."

Sometimes people mistakenly refer to all forms of cognitive impairment as "Alzheimer's disease." However, the fact is that many illnesses and factors cause cognitive impairment in people. Alzheimer's disease is only one of them.

It's important for all members of the nursing home's health care team -- including families and friends -- to understand that different people with different factors causing different types of cognitive impairment *can't be treated and helped in the same way.*

In other words, in the same way that people don't expect cough syrup to be equally effective for a cough, a headache or arthritis, a single care strategy at a nursing home will not be effective for all those who are suffering from different types of cognitive impairment.

At Extencicare, staff assess two things to decide what kind of care plan will be most successful for a cognitively impaired resident.

First, staff look at the person. All of us are individuals because of our unique blueprint of lifestyle, history, social needs, family relationships, and cultural and religious background. Extencicare's philosophy of care clearly states that the individual's needs come first. Accordingly, staff do their best to make sure the care plan suits the personality and habits of the person it's meant for.

Second, when a resident is admitted to the nursing home -- and at regular intervals thereafter -- staff assess the cause of the cognitive impairment. *Physical causes* include undetected infections, cardio-vascular problems (eg strokes), chemical imbalances due to poor nutrition, and worsening conditions like Alzheimer's disease.

Emotional causes include loneliness, and loss of purpose in life (this and other major losses can lead to depression, which often mimics Alzheimer's disease).

External causes of cognitive impairment include head injuries, reactions to medications, or exposure to poisonous substances such as lead or carbon monoxide.

You may be interested to know that the most frequent cause of cognitive impairment in elderly people living in nursing homes is a) progressive conditions like Alzheimer's disease; b) cardio-vascular problems, such as strokes; and c) depression.

With such a wide variety of illnesses and factors causing cognitive impairment, staff must provide a similarly wide variety of care strategies for their residents.

And to be effective, the care strategy must take more than the cause of cognitive impairment into account. It must also take the person's individual "blueprint" into account.

In the midst of all this variation, one thing remains constant: our goal to do everything possible to help the resident live life with dignity and meaning. Meeting that goal depends not only on a thorough medical assessment of the person, but also on lots of good communication among all members of the care team.

And that's how families and friends can help!

If you have questions about cognitive impairment, please talk to your director of care.