

Alzheimer's exposes parents' life-long influence

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As Alzheimer patients regress, their ability to comprehend reality as others see it inevitably declines. Those who become “wanderers” may come to believe that if they could escape the confines of a secure unit in a nursing home they could go home to the way things were in their earlier lives. They may believe that they could still find their previous homes and families waiting for them.

Some may even imagine they could find their car waiting for them in the nursing home parking lot. They may possibly believe if they could escape the confines of a nursing home they could get into their car and drive off to their former home and families and friends. They imagine they would still be able to cook their meals and care for their homes in the same way they could do in former years. Of course, if they are wanderers, they could simply be seeking something they cannot find in their present surroundings.

As patients with Alzheimer’s disease regress, they often feel more and more confined and more unhappy about life because they now perceive a different reality. Their new reality will shrink to the size of the nursing home room they now occupy. Activities like eating, bathing, medications and dressing and bed times will become more regimented to suit their declining abilities and their failing energies. Their memories about the way things used to be will become more fleeting and short- term memories will become even shorter.

Patients will become more child-like as they begin to recognize with sadness and some depression that they are entrapped by their lack of energy and declining cognitive functions. If they are fortunate enough to have frequent visitors including family members, they may still be encouraged and remain peaceful. They will be able to look ahead to family visitors who encourage them to understand that they are still valued and loved. In the best nursing homes, staff will also provide this most important component of love and caring. Even though many patients live for the moment, they will be comforted by those who care for them daily.

Each Alzheimer patient is unique in spite of the patterns of regression mentioned above. Some patients will lash out verbally and even physically. It is sometimes difficult

to keep them from hurting themselves or their fellow patients. Yet they are just as much in need of caring, encouragement and love as their more quiet counterparts.

Caregivers will face difficult ethical questions as to whether or not they deserve to be given the love and attention that is easier to bestow on the more co-operative patients. This is an ethical question that will try the moral fibre of both secular and religious caregivers. It raises questions as to whether or not each patient is of equal human value. I think the best caregivers believe that all humans are of equal worth by virtue of the fact they are part of the human family.

Other patients are more quiet, sad or tearful. They may speak of their own mothers or fathers as though their parents were still alive even though the patients themselves are well into their 80s or 90s and their parents have long since deceased. They say things like "When my father comes he will take charge," or "My mother will organize the cleaning and cooking when I go home." Still others will cry out for their mother, father or even grandpa as patients become more child-like when their daily bedtime approaches.

Comments made by patients about their parents are fairly frequent. I have come to believe that all of us may subconsciously carry our own dependencies on our parents into old age. Perhaps many years ago when we earlier emerged into adolescence we suppressed our dependencies on our parents because we wanted to assure ourselves we were capable of managing our own lives independently.

Yet we may all carry these hidden traits into old age when these dependencies may serve humans well if needed in times of declining health. Modern psychologists may call these traits schemas. If Alfred Wallace or Charles Darwin were alive today, they might assert that the tendency to call out for our parents' help in old age is an indication of one of evolution's long-standing successful survival schemas.

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