

GETTING A DIAGNOSIS

All of us have trouble with losing and remembering things from time to time and there is nothing unusual about this. However, if you or someone close to you, is experiencing a noticeable change in memory and/or other symptoms such as confusion, poor concentration, mood changes and difficulty with everyday tasks it is important to get these checked out with the G.P.

There are some good reasons for doing this. These symptoms may result from a cause that is treatable such as depression, bereavement, infections and vitamin and thyroid deficiencies. But if it is due to dementia there are positive reasons for gaining a diagnosis:

- A diagnosis provides an explanation for symptoms and provides an opportunity for gaining information and knowledge
- Medications may help some people, for some time to improve their functioning
- To provide access to a range of practical services to support people to live well
- To give time to make plans for the future.

The following quotes show how some Dementia Canterbury clients reacted to a dementia diagnosis:

“The diagnosis wasn’t a shock it just confirmed what we knew. We just keep going with life and treat everything normally, like the activities we’re involved in, we keep going. It gives you answers a diagnosis, that’s all. Life goes on. It does.”

“My life hasn’t changed a lot, I’m still doing much the same things as I was but it takes me a bit longer, but it otherwise hasn’t changed a lot. I still belong to my church group and my Probus Club. I still go to those things and I’m still driving”.

Dementia affects each person in a different way, but generally people may experience difficulty with:

- Memory impairment
- Language, for example, forgetting words or using the wrong words
- Motor activities and coordination, for example, doing up buttons
- Concentrating, planning or organising
- Recognising or identifying objects

What can I expect from my GP appointment?

GP's in Canterbury all follow the same cognitive impairment health pathway which directs their assessment. The diagnosis of dementia requires an in-depth assessment that may include some or all of the following:

- A thorough physical examination including blood and urine tests
- A thorough medical history which may include discussion with your partner/family
- An examination of your mental well-being
- A MOCA (Montreal Cognitive Assessment) memory test
- A CT or MRI scan
- Referral for neuropsychiatric testing from a clinical psychologist
- Referral to the Memory Assessment Clinic at Burwood Hospital

The reason for such a rigorous approach is to make sure any other conditions that may explain the changes being experienced are excluded. It may take a few visits to the medical practice, and other appointments if needed, before a diagnosis is made. Between visits it can be a good idea to write down any questions you may have and to have a support person accompany you to appointments.

Feelings after a diagnosis

Reactions to a diagnosis of dementia can range from disbelief and shock to relief at having an explanation for what is happening. Often there can be a wide range of different reactions within a family. However expected or unexpected the diagnosis is, it still takes time and energy to process and adjust to the changes that come with a chronic and unwelcome health condition.

“My reaction was, it’s a big shock to you – you realise that life is going to be different now, that things are going to change and it’s not going to be the same as it was”

“Friends said ‘why didn’t you tell us sooner, we knew there was something wrong?’ And I think that says it all...it took family members longer to come to terms with it and it took older family members too long, in fact I don’t think they probably have”.

“The diagnosis was positive; I think because he hasn’t changed at all, he was still the same person”.

“It took a while to realise that I wasn’t going crazy and I wasn’t alone.”

“There’s so many available groups and supports out there now, try not to be scared about it, there’s so much help out there for everyone not just the person who is suffering from it but their family as well because it’s hard on everyone”.

Finding support

For some people one of the most powerful ways of coming to terms with a diagnosis of dementia is to talk to other people in the same situation. Discussing hopes and fears with others facing the same issues can help reduce some of the anxiety and sense of aloneness that a diagnosis can bring, both for people with dementia and those who are supporting them. Understanding that a diagnosis does not change who a person is and that it is possible to still enjoy a good quality of life is an important part of learning to live well with dementia.

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