

More on the Value of Early Detection

In the last column I raised the challenge about our willingness to explore the truth about how we are managing. Many of us are quite skilled at shaping the information we receive from the world to support what it is we already believe. This is *confirmation bias*. Many of us are equally skilled at hiding from the world what it is we truly believe about our self. Call this what you will, but I'll call it being human. As I suggested previously, we depend on others to keep us in touch with the realities of who we are now and how we are doing.

We know that the brain undergoes changes as we age, just as do the bones and the skin. Almost 40 per cent of people over the age of 65 experience some form of memory loss. When there is no underlying medical condition causing this memory loss, it is known as "age-associated memory impairment," which is considered a part of the normal aging process. What we know as dementia is a decline in mental ability severe enough to interfere with daily life. Two of the following core mental functions must be significantly impaired to be considered dementia:

- Memory
- Communication and language
- Ability to focus and pay attention
- Reasoning and judgment
- Visual perception

As people continue to live longer lives we know that the prevalence of dementia, the absolute numbers of those afflicted will increase. But thankfully over the last several decades the age specific risk has been declining in more affluent countries. If you are curious or concerned about what you are experiencing, I suggest you look at the useful document about the 10 early signs - https://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/10_signs. And better yet, empower someone close to check you for any of those signs.

Of course we have spoken before and will again about how our choices work to lower our risk of debilitating change. Ultimately the wellness path is not about preventing change from happening, but about doing what we can to nudge ourselves in the direction of the changes we wish for. And more importantly perhaps, it is about making the most of our experience in the face of the changes that come. Dementia is not a normal part of aging, and it is a complex problem with a variety of variants, none of which have a clear path of prevention. So while we do what we can to make good choices supporting cognitive health, part of our preparation should also include positioning ourselves in the direction of acceptance.

So this to me, a constructive attitude in the realm of *spiritual* wellness, is the prime reason to look honestly and early at how we are doing cognitively. While there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease as we now know it, there are others causes of cognitive change, and in any case there might be ways to intervene, slow or ease the impact on you or your loved ones. The Alzheimer's Association provides this list of benefits of early detection:

A better chance of benefiting from treatment

More time to plan for the future

Lessened anxieties about unknown problems

Increased chances of participating in clinical drug trials, helping advance research

An opportunity to participate in decisions about care, transportation, living options, financial and legal matters

Time to develop a relationship with doctors and care partners

Benefit from care and support services, making it easier for them and their family to manage the disease

My position is that none of us are or have ever been truly independent. Certainly if and when we begin to lose capacity, the sooner we see, acknowledge and prepare for the implications, the better we and those who act on our behalf can manage those implications.