

Myths About Normal Aging and Alzheimer's

As a neuropsychologist (a doctor who specializes in evaluating brain functioning), I see hundreds of patients a year. There are certain misunderstandings involving normal aging and Alzheimer's Disease that I often hear from these patients and their family members. Here are just a few of them:

- 1) "I only remember the things that are important to me." This is a common excuse used by people who have memory problems. The reality is that individuals with normal memory can recall information regardless of how important it is to them.
- 2) "I can remember in great detail events that occurred many years ago (e.g., during childhood) so I can't have Alzheimer's Disease." In the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease, long term memories tend to be unaffected. It is the memories for recent events that people begin to have problems with.
- 3) "I don't keep track of the day of the week or the date of the month. This is not because I have a memory problem, but rather because I'm retired." Actually confusion about the day or the date can be an early sign of Alzheimer's Disease.
- 4) "I'm 67 years old. I'm too young to have Alzheimer's Disease" The risk for Alzheimer's Disease begins to increase when people reach the age of 65, so 67 is not too young.
- 5) "My mother repeats herself, but she's 88 years old so that's normal for her age." As people age, the risk for Alzheimer's increases. According to the Alzheimer's Association, one in every ten people over the age of 65 and about half of those 85 and older have Alzheimer's Disease. The best way to determine if a person's memory is normal for their age is to undergo a neuropsychological evaluation. This is basically an exam that measures your memory and compares your performance to other people in your age group.
- 6) "The doctor said that my MRI was normal so I can't have Alzheimer's." A special part of the brain called the hippocampus has an important role in the creation of new memories. This part of the brain is often affected in Alzheimer's Disease. Doctors often order an MRI of the brain to see if this part of the brain looks abnormal for a person's age. However, people with early stage Alzheimer's can have a normal MRI, so this condition cannot be ruled out based upon a normal MRI.
- 7) "My doctor told me I had dementia, but never said anything about Alzheimer's Disease." Dementia is a term that is used by many people but is often misunderstood. Dementia means that a person has had a decline in his/her memory and at least one other area of mental functioning such as language, problem solving or sense of direction. People with dementia often have problems with doing things like driving, managing their finances or shopping. Dementia is

not a cause, but rather the result of some condition. For example, Alzheimer's Disease is the number one cause of dementia in the elderly. So while some doctors may tell patients they have dementia, in many cases they are actually saying you have Alzheimer's Dementia.

- 8) "I would never go to be evaluated for Alzheimer's Disease. After all, there's nothing that could be done if I had it." This is absolutely not true. There are medications used to treat Alzheimer's Disease. While these medications are not a cure and they don't reverse the memory problems, they slow down the disorder so that your memory and other mental abilities do not decline as quickly. I have seen numerous patients who have been taking these medications for a few years already and many of them continue to lead active lives. It is important to know that while Alzheimer's Disease is a slowly progressive disorder, the decline of memory starts to speed up as the disease progresses. For this reason, the earlier a person gets diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease and receives treatment, the better the prognosis for their future.
- 9) "My doctor said that I need to take a driving test. Even though I have Alzheimer's Disease, I have never had a car accident or received a ticket in my life." Driving abilities are often affected in early Alzheimer's Disease and research studies suggest that people with this condition are at an increased risk for motor vehicle accidents. Even though a person may have been an excellent driver prior to having Alzheimer's Disease, this may no longer be the case. The best way to evaluate a person's driving skills is a formal driving evaluation. Such evaluations are conducted at the Department of Motor Vehicles and by special qualified professionals such as occupational therapists.

Lee Memory Care offers free memory screenings at both Lee Memorial and Cape Coral Hospitals. This screening only takes 15 minutes of your time. After you take this screening, your results will be reviewed by one of the neuropsychologists at Lee Memory Care who will then send you a confidential letter with any recommendations that he or she may have for you. There are very few things in life that are free! Please take advantage of this opportunity. For more information, or to make an appointment to schedule a free memory screening at either location, please call Diana at Lee Memory Care. Her phone number is 239-334-5634.

Noal Shurak, PsyD
Clinical Neuropsychologist