

**[This is one of a series of columns Joen Kinnan wrote that appeared in the Pioneer Press newspapers. The name of the person quoted has been removed for privacy.]**

#### **FAMILY SERVICE COLUMN**

“My mother, who is 87, has recently come to live with our family. We wanted her with us, but she’s driving us crazy with her forgetfulness. She can’t remember that she’s eaten breakfast an hour later, and sometimes I’m not even sure she recognizes the kids. What’s going on? Could she have Alzheimer’s disease?”

The symptoms you describe sound very much as if your mother may have Alzheimer’s disease, which is the most common form of dementia. “Dementia” is a broad term used to describe several types of problems characterized by abnormal changes in the brain. They all have in common a decline in mental function, particularly memory.

Alzheimer’s disease accounts for about half of all cases of dementia. Memory loss in Alzheimer’s disease is not like normal forgetfulness. A woman who is ordinarily forgetful can still remember details about the thing she has forgotten. For example, she may momentarily forget a neighbor’s name, but she still knows the person is her neighbor. People with Alzheimer’s disease forget not only the details but also the entire context.

Occasionally younger people develop Alzheimer’s disease, but it becomes more common with age. The exact trigger for the brain-tissue changes that occur is unknown. There may be a genetic component to Alzheimer’s disease, but current research suggests that genes contribute only to a person’s susceptibility to the illness. Apparently – at least in some cases – environmental factors may be necessary to activate the disease. At the moment, there is no simple diagnostic test, but your mother’s physician can make a diagnosis based on history and an examination of her physical and mental status. The physician can also rule out other – and possibly curable – causes of memory loss.

Unfortunately, there is no cure for Alzheimer’s disease, and you can expect your mother’s symptoms to get worse. Caring for her is bound to be difficult for her and for your family. Having an established routine helps with daily activities. For example, your mother might have a bath every night before bed and take a daily walk with you. If your mother can remain active, she is more likely to sleep well at night. You should encourage her to retain her

independence as long as possible. At this stage, she is probably aware that she is having difficulty coping with everyday life, so treat her with respect.

Try to avoid confusion and conflict. If your mother does something silly, remember that it is the disease's fault, not your mother's. Keep things simple; too many choices can be upsetting. Memory aids like lists, calendars, and message boards can help her keep track of things. To help your mother remember absent friends and family, you can put photos around the house and talk about the people in them often.

Similarly, if you put a sign on the refrigerator that says, "lunch is at 12 o'clock," you won't have to answer endless questions about when you're going to eat. People with dementia often ask the same question over and over because they don't remember asking it before. Another irritating habit: you may have noticed that your mother follows you wherever you go. Alzheimer's patients are often clingy. They don't want to let you out of sight for fear they won't see you again. If you do have to go out, leave another sign telling where you've gone and when you'll be back.

Try to live as normal a life as possible during this stressful period. Make time for yourself and for the rest of the family. If you find that you're frequently angry, depressed, or frustrated, you might need some professional help in coping. "Caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's disease puts a tremendous strain on family relationships," says  L.C.S.W., counselor for older adults at Family Service. "Joining a support group can be really helpful because the caregiver meets others who have to deal with the same issues," she adds.

For more information and further tips on caring for your mother, contact the Alzheimer's Association at 312-335-8700 or visit their website at [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org). For information on local community resources, contact Oak Park Township Senior Services at 708-383-8060.

*Located at 120 S. Marion, Oak Park, not-for-profit Family Service & Mental Health Center of Oak Park & River Forest provides counseling, psychiatric and prevention/education programs for men, women, youth, and families. To learn more about its programs or to make an appointment, call (708) 383-7500, ext. 108.*