

Matte story

More than memory loss: recognizing dementia's early symptoms

They say hindsight is 20/20 and never is that more true than when looking back on the first signs of dementia.

Most people understand diminished short-term memory is a symptom of Alzheimer's disease. But there are more subtle signs that if recognized in time, could lead to early diagnosis and treatment.



Mood swings, misplacing things in unusual places and difficulties finding the right word are just three examples.

Retired Fergus, Ont. teacher Sharon Ogden wishes she'd known apathy was also on that list.

"If I knew the warning signs, maybe John could have had many more productive years," she says, referring to her husband. "If he was diagnosed as having a mild cognitive disorder he could have got out exercising a lot more and really dug into some sort of mental stimulation."

In fact, Sharon did wonder early on about John's uncharacteristic lack of interest in learning new computer systems at Ontario Hydro, where he worked as an engineer. But John was good at brushing it off with humour.

"He was always so funny about it. Talking about his keyboarding skills – he had everybody laughing. But the point was he never could catch on and therefore he wasn't interested, and he was left behind," she says.

Confounding symptoms make diagnosis difficult

Yet apathy is a tricky symptom since it can signal other illnesses such as depression. In fact, some early symptoms of dementia also overlap with those of thyroid or heart disease.

That means only a doctor can accurately diagnose Alzheimer's disease. Commercially-available memory tests for self-diagnosis only prey on boomers' fears and are not reliable, say experts in dementia.

A checklist of changes such as this one ([link to www.alzheimerontario.org](http://www.alzheimerontario.org)) from the Alzheimer Society is a good way to keep track of early warning signs.

With a reliable and early diagnosis, families can not only plan early for how they will deal with the disease's progression, but they may also experience some psychological benefits.

Miscommunication and marriage counselling

In Ann-Marie Wilson's case, it might have saved years of anguish and marriage counselling. Her husband Carl has always loved her dearly and was the kind of man who hated to annoy his wife.

But a number of years before Carl was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, Ann-Marie noticed that they just weren't communicating.

"I would make a statement and if it was made in the positive, he'd hear it in the negative. Pleasant would become unpleasant," recalls Ann-Marie of New Hamburg, Ont. "I thought maybe I was the problem. I thought, 'I'm just being a witch.'"

It seemed every time they talked, they disagreed. "I was fit to be tied," says Ann-Marie.

When a marriage counsellor asked them to rate their relationship on a scale of one to ten, the results spoke volumes. Carl said their marriage was an 11. She gave it a three.

Ann-Marie became convinced she was the problem, and wonders if an earlier diagnosis might have relieved her of that guilt.

Trouble with numbers

Tom Noble, a retired Windsor teacher, says he knew there was something wrong when his wife Janet was unable to put together their family budget. "She spent two days trying to budget. She didn't succeed. She just had a bunch of figures that didn't make sense."

But even before that, Janet had begun to change. She would sleep in late, sometimes past noon. Tom and his family had no reason to suspect early dementia. "She's on blood pressure medications and one of them makes you tired," says Tom. "We just thought she was tired."

In Janet's case, matters were complicated by a bad fall, during which she hit her head. She spent three weeks in hospital and within a year of being released, was diagnosed with dementia.

Sometimes the only sign *is* memory loss

Yet there are also cases of dementia where symptoms are unmistakable. That was George Stewart's experience.

"They say that from the time of diagnosis you can look back approximately two years to see things that happened that one dismisses as aberrations, that we dismiss by saying 'We're all getting old,'" says the retired University of Windsor law professor.

"But with Carolyn, it was short-term memory loss. All the time. There were no other indications that I can spot."

Carolyn was diagnosed relatively early in her illness, at the age of 63. While George says an early diagnosis and treatment with Aricept made no difference in the progress of Carolyn's illness, there was at least some benefit to spotting it early.

"There's no question that once it is identified, one needs help from the Alzheimer Society," he says. "One needs mostly education and respite."