

MENTAL HEALTH AND ALZHEIMER'S by Christine Nightingale

Strictly speaking, dementia of any sort reduces the capacity of the affected individual to cope with the ordinary challenges of life. Due to a reduced capacity to think clearly, remember things, and understand social skills, their lives are radically altered.

Yet how that looks in the finer details seems to have everything to do with the individual person who is affected by this condition.

Within my family of five siblings, two of us have developed dementia. As the older sister in the family, I seem to have taken on some of the communication and caregiving function with these two siblings. And what is interesting to me is how radically different my brother and sister are in their current daily lives. They are still essentially the same people they have always been...with an overlay of an extra challenge.

My older brother Ernie was always a kidder, fun-loving, physically active, with a tremendous sense of fun and optimism. As a talented builder, he built his own home in a Maine rural area, with accompanying dock. He built a home next door for his middle son and his family, and taught him his business. Ernie built up a successful dock-building and dock-maintenance business on a lake where 120 families had summer cottages. Ernie taught his son David all the details of the business, including building docks, bringing them in for the winter, and putting them out in the spring.

When Ernie developed dementia, there was an almost seamless transition of responsibilities. David gradually took over more and more of the work of the business, and David's wife took over cooking for Ernie, shovelling snow, and whatever else needed to be done at the house next door.

When I make my weekly phone call to Ernie he is always cheerful and happy, as he always has been. He is more or less oblivious that he no longer runs his business or his life. He no longer drives his truck, motor boat or motorcycle, but he does not remember this fact. He accepts the changes to the extent that he is aware of them.

No one uses the term Alzheimer's. No one makes a point of letting him know that he is no longer in charge. Last week I reminded him of the names of his other kids and grandkids, and asked him to write them down, and maybe call them if he felt like it. But the great blessing is that he accepts that "old people get forgetful," and that his needs are taken care of by family.

My sister Ann is in a completely different situation. She has had mental health issues all her life, has always been grumpy, with low social skills ,and does not like people very much. When she started to show signs of dementia, I quickly started looking for a group home which would be able to take care of her. It took fully nine months of daily phone calls and emails applying to every care home in the Greater Toronto area, before a spot became available. The facility is

excellent, with delicious meals (always available if desired by visitors who come at mealtime), caring staff, and plenty of activities.

I call Ann once a week also. It is a completely different scenario, though. Ann is not interested in having a conversation. She does not choose to engage in most of the activities, just spends her time wandering about the halls or lying in bed.

I send weekly care packages (clothes, books, chocolates, art supplies) but Ann never thinks to say thank you.

In short, her basic personality is the same as it always was with an overlay of Alzheimer's. This makes meaningful or pleasant interaction almost impossible .

Whereas I can and do look forward to my conversations with my brother.

Before having this experience with my own family, I would not have known that dementia just seems to accentuate whatever personality traits the person had before. So apparently in some cases, those with dementia can still have pleasant conversations and interactions. In others...apparently depending on their previous personalities ...this is not possible.

I of course realise that the situation will only worsen for both of them. One of my healthy brothers handles the financial aspects of caring for my sister's needs; the other sometimes calls our brother with dementia , who is pleasant to talk to. The important thing about dementia ...as with mental illness... is that all family members are ultimately affected by caring for their loved ones' needs.