

The Reality of Memory Loss

by John Foster

John Foster is a member of the Kamloops Early Stage Alzheimer/Dementia Support Group. John is also a published author. Please note that this article has been reviewed and edited for length.

I was diagnosed with pre-senile dementia in 1986. I am lucky this condition has taken so long to progress. I had to give up working in 1994, but I am still basically functional as of 2007.

I find my memory loss, while very frightening and discouraging, also very interesting from a purely objective viewpoint. Memory loss is interesting not only because of what is forgotten, but because of what is remembered.

I have had the most astonishing things come to mind, especially things from the past, with amazing clarity. Sometimes I have persons, their names, and related events come to mind that I haven't been able to recall for decades. Sometimes I recall things that happened during delirium associated with sleeping and awakening. Meanwhile, things from the immediate and near past fade in seconds.

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I have never read an article on memory loss written from the inside-out or by someone suffering from it. Instead, such articles are mainly collections of information intended for my physicians.

My doctor has told me that I should not use any memory aids as using the memory keeps the brain active and prevents lethargy. However, if it weren't for the fact that I keep lists, I wouldn't be able to function.

I find my most serious memory losses are associated with previous poor memory habits. I have always been weak in number recall—now I have trouble remembering a phone number until after I have dialed it.

Ordinary things have become more and more difficult. Simply finding a parked car has become an exercise in futility and frustration. After walking through the entire parking lot and not finding the car, you suddenly realize you've been looking in the wrong parking lot. So you go to a more likely parking lot and walk through it, looking for and not finding the lost car. Sometime around then, you realize you have been looking for the wrong vehicle. This can go on for hours.

I find that it is easier to write than to speak. My speech tends to disintegrate in the middle of a sentence when ordinary words evaporate; or sometimes I inadvertently substitute similar sounding or similar meaning words. However when I write, especially with the word processor, I have time to sit and wait for words to reappear, or to look them up.

I was recently told that I shouted at my family for the first time. I do tend to over-react—I get morose at times or giggle when it is inappropriate.

For most of my life I was mentally active. I had the sixth-highest IQ in the Vernon army camp in 1945 and I had the best vocabulary in first-year engineering at UBC. Now, I miss being able to function properly.

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An Open Letter

by Anne Owen



Dear friend,

You may know that I was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease over three years ago after going through a year of testing to eliminate other things.

Traditionally, people were diagnosed at a much later stage of the disease and were unable to participate in future decisions. Now along with early diagnosis, there is medication to slow the progress of the disease. I am taking Aricept to help me manage better. There is no cure so far, but they are working on it! I feel lucky to have been diagnosed early and to have the support of my family and friends.

Sometimes, with people I do not know well or who do not know me well, I feel embarrassed because I have made a mistake and do not know what to do. So I am letting you know what may happen sometimes:

- I often make unexpected word substitutions or say something I was not planning to say, and I am as surprised as you.
- Short-term memory is a problem.
- I cannot understand people who speak quickly.
- I have days when I cannot function well. I get depressed. It feels like a fog has come down.
- Sometimes I cannot write well or spell, so communication is a problem.

Still, I enjoy my life and have fun with my family and friends. I live far more days feeling joy than sadness. I know what the future may be, and I will take one day at a time. I wanted you to know this so that you can better understand me.

Ann Owen is a member of the Vancouver Early Stage Alzheimer/ Dementia Support Group. Please note that this letter has been reviewed and edited for length.

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Healthy Living with Dementia

1. HAVE A HEALTHY DIET

It is important to maintain a healthy, varied diet with plenty of omega-3 fatty acids (e.g. salmon, green leafy vegetables); include lots of fruit and vegetables and low-fat foods. High cholesterol has been linked to stroke and brain-cell damage. Make sure you are also drinking enough fluids to prevent dehydration—at least six cups of water a day.

2. BE MENTALLY ACTIVE

Varied mental challenges stimulate the brain. Make it your business to find things that challenge your memory and thought processes. This will help to strengthen the connections between your brain cells. There are always new experiences to try, so be proactive and find something you enjoy. There are a number of puzzles you can access for free—either in the free newspapers that come to our homes or on the internet.

3. EXERCISE

According to researchers, physical exercise stimulates brain activity. Exercising will help increase the blood flow to the brain—helping to prevent diseases that put you at higher risk for brain damage such as diabetes and stroke, and heart disease.

4. QUIT THE HABIT

Alcohol is not recommended if you have any signs of dementia and may interfere with medication you are taking. Giving up smoking will improve your overall health and be one less fire risk.

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5. SLEEP WELL

Try to remain active during the day to lessen the chance of dozing off. A good night's sleep helps, but it can be more of a challenge if you have dementia—six to eight hours of sleep is best. Find a relaxing evening routine that suits you.

6. STRESS LESS

A lot of stress is not good for the brain—research has shown it can actually damage and kill off brain cells. If you are having challenges with your memory and ability to organize things, it is important that you balance this with time spent relaxing and reducing stress. Ask a friend or family member to help you learn relaxation techniques or take a class. There are some excellent relaxation tapes and CDs you could listen to.

7. KEEP CONNECTED

Meeting up with friends and family, traveling, and doing your favourite activities can all help keep your mind active and reduce stress. Do not isolate yourself as this is not good for your emotional and brain health.

8. BE PRO-ACTIVE

Manage other conditions that may also affect you such as diabetes, hypertension, and high blood pressure. Visit your doctor for advice and support. Check that the medications you may be taking are still necessary and working for you.

References:

*Heads up for a Healthier Brain—Alzheimer Society of B.C.—
www.alzheimerbc.org/headsup.php*

Alliance for Aging Research—www.agingresearch.org/brainhealth/index.cfm

*Alzheimer's Society UK—www.alzheimers.org.uk/I_have_dementia/
Looking_after_yourself/healthy.htm*

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We asked support groups, "What advice would you give someone who just received a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or related dementia?" The Kamloops and Penticton Early Stage Alzheimer/Dementia Support Group members had this to say...

KAMLOOPS

- GET information, TALK to people, ATTEND a support group, ASK all your questions.
- Keep physically active: walking, etc.
- Just keep living. Do the things you want to do...NOW!
- Don't allow it to frighten you. You are still the same person you were prior to your diagnosis. Refuse to feel sorry for yourself.
- Appreciate that the progression is a slow process and keep living!!!

PENTICTON

- Get info! Get support!
- Get connected with your family and fill them in.
- THIS is where you need to be (in a support group).
- WE understand!!!
- Surround yourself with people who understand and can support you.
- Share your diagnosis so that more people can support you.

Do you have any other ideas? We would love to hear from you. This newsletter is by you for you, so write to us and let us know.

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**Just keep living.
Do the things you want to do...NOW!**
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A Journey *Beyond Memory*

- what:** a televised documentary about dementia
- where:** on Knowledge Network *(please check your local listings to find Knowledge Network in your area)*
- when:**
- Monday, May 28 at 8 p.m.
 - Thursday, May 31 at 11 p.m.
 - Monday, June 11 at 9:30 p.m.
 - Thursday, June 14 at noon.
 - Wednesday, August 29 at 9 p.m.

Tune in to ***Beyond Memory***, a powerful 80-minute documentary about dementia that will be shown on the Knowledge Network. ***Beyond Memory*** takes a look at Alzheimer's disease and dementia in general as told through the stories of five B.C. families.

Each individual featured in the documentary is at a different stage in their illness. Visit www.knowledgenetwork.ca/beyondmemory after May 28 for more information.

The Alzheimer Society of B.C. is proud to have developed this documentary with the generous support of the Government of B.C., and in partnership with Knowledge Network.



Dementia Helpline
toll-free in B.C.

1-800-936-6033



Our Vision

Our ultimate vision is to create a world without Alzheimer's disease and related dementia.

Our Mission

The Alzheimer Society of B.C. exists to alleviate the personal and social consequences of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, to promote public awareness and to search for the causes and the cure.

about *Insight*:

**Honorary Editor of *Insight*:
Norma Selbie**

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