Coping With an Alzheimer’s Diagnosis

by ERIC PATTERSON

Living With Alzheimer’s

Shock, anger, frustration, disbelief, sadness, anxiety, confusion and despair are only a small sample of the feelings you are likely to experience when your doctor gives you an Alzheimer's diagnosis.

When a chronic medical condition comes into your life, it tries to take over. It tries to make your whole world revolve around your diagnosis while you forget the people, events, and activities that really matter. Allowing your life to be consumed will limit the quality of life you can hope to achieve. When quantity is in question, quality is all you have.

Coping with an Alzheimer’s diagnosis is not an easy task. It is not something that just happens. It is overwhelming and scary, but if you want to improve your quality of life and the quality for the people around you, you must take action. Through action you tell Alzheimer’s that you will not succumb.

Take Care of Yourself

An Alzheimer’s diagnosis takes many courses. There is no “normal” as one person's path is greatly different than another’s. Because of this, working towards the best case scenario will motivate and empower you towards maintaining and improving your daily life. Here’s how:

Experience the Loss

Learning that you have a chronic, life-threatening illness triggers a grief response in you as you begin to process what the diagnosis entails. You will experience variations of denial, anger, sadness, bargaining, and acceptance which are better known as the five stages of grief.

Although they are stages, you will not move through these in a neat, orderly process. Instead, you will fluctuate as you move forward and backwards through the process before you end in acceptance.

Do not put too much pressure on yourself to “grieve the right way.” Your body will tell you what you need in each stage. The only precaution to take is to seek feedback from loved ones if you feel that you have been in one stage for too long or it seems to be negatively impacting your life.

A psychotherapist is a great support if you believe your grieving to be stuck or delayed.

Focus on Your Physical Health

People sometimes react in unexpected ways after a diagnosis due to anger and sadness. They may begin to mistreat or abuse their body through drugs, alcohol, poor diet or poor self-care because they feel their body “let them down.” Of course, exposing your body to this only worsens your overall physical health.

Instead, look for ways to improve your physical presence. Exercise, eat well and get enough rest to improve your physical well-being. Creating routines will make consistency more successful. Find way to strengthen your brain through mental stimulation. Taking a class or trying a new hobby may help slow the progress of Alzheimer's.

Next page: focusing on mental and social help, plus how taking care of others during this time can help you through.

Take Care of Yourself

Focus on Mental Health

Work to identify changes in your moods, worry, energy, motivation, and appetite to understand the impact that the diagnosis is having on your mental health.

Any chronic medical condition breeds stress that might overwhelm your prior coping skills. Engaging in pleasurable activities, completing relaxation techniques, and journaling are just a few of the available coping skills you can add to your repertoire.

Again, a psychotherapist can be very helpful here and almost a necessity given your situation. A therapist can assist you in adjusting your life to your new circumstances and problem-solve when new developments emerge along the way. If your symptoms become too undesirable, schedule an evaluation from a psychiatrist. A psychiatrist that has experience working with people who have Alzheimer's will have a solid understanding of your situation and the ability to prescribe helpful medications.

Focus on Social Health

Having a good quality of life means being a well-rounded person. The trio of physical health, mental health, and social health depend on each other to help you arrive at your peak performance.

Maintaining current beneficial relationships while adding new ones will provide you will a needed social outlet. Family and friends provide you with the opportunity to discuss and process your thought and feelings while receive new feedback.

You already know what you think about a situation. Talking to someone else will provide you with a fresh point-of-view that you did not consider previously. Socialization is a great distraction. Need to get your mind off things? Call a friend.

Take Care of Others

Unless you live on a deserted island or alone in a space station, you need people and you need them to be well. Your diagnosis obviously impacts you, but also the people around you. If they are not managing their feelings well, your own symptoms could worsen.

Taking care of the people who take care of you is a fantastic mindset. Working to improve the life of someone you care about will improve your life in return. Here's how:

Don't Pull Away

Often, people will think it is better for them to fade into the background after receiving an unwanted diagnosis. If you've considered this, reconsider. Pulling away not only hurts you but those around you as well.

The situation has changed. The relationship has changed, but you can find success if you are willing to try. Ending or limiting the relationship ensures damage and failure.

Express Yourself

Let the important people in your life know what you are going through. Work to communicate clearly and effectively. Tell them what your comfortable doing and not doing. Allow them to understand that it is still okay to laugh and have fun. Their lives do not need to stop because yours changed.

Discuss what expectations you have in place for when your symptoms worsen. Many caretakers have excessive guilt regarding the decision to transition some out of the home and into a supervised environment. Having the conversation now reduces risk of future regret.

Next page: more on taking care of others and thinking about how you want to spend your remaining years.

Take Care of Others

Identify Their Needs

Everyone is likely asking you how you are doing and what you need. Find an opportunity to ask these questions to the other people in your life. Learn what they are feeling and thinking. Identify how their behaviors or habits have changed.

Ask how you can help while letting them know that helping them would help you. Don't settle for a short "I'm fine," or "I'm hanging in there." Let your loved ones know that you care and they should be free to express themselves fully.

Find the Positives

In a situation like this, people tend to focus on what is lost rather than what is still available. Work to scratch goals off your "bucket list." Take trips and visit with friends. The more you focus on the negatives, the larger they appear. Opportunities for happiness still remain.

Leave a Mark

How do you want to be remembered? How do you want others to think of you? What do you want your obituary to say? This is the chance to live your life the way you have always wanted.

Plan or suggest family gatherings or a dinner to reconnect with friends. You can leave your mark by creating something for your family or the loved people in your life. A scrapbook, photo album, video and family tree are all great options.

Taking time to write letters or have significant conversations can really solidify relationships by removing ambiguity and confusion. This enables you to change and improve that lasting impression that you leave.

Conclusion

An Alzheimer's diagnosis is not welcomed by anyone, but it allows you to be reminded of what everyone forgets: You time here is limited.

Do not let Alzheimer's trigger lasting despair and diminished motivation. Let it prompt you to fight to improve your quality of life, to live each day to its fullest potential, to help the people that help you and to leave a last impression on the people around you.

The only failure is admitting defeat.