

# Weathering Alzheimer's

By Jamie Simpson

In winter, snow often blankets the Miami Valley. Some snows are minor, with just a dusting or half inch. Some winter storms are significant; with a half foot of snow blanketing the ground when it is over, or ice that renders our streets, driveways, and sidewalks like a hazardous skating rink. We always make it through these storms, and come out fine. Perhaps a tree limb falls, a slip leaves us with a bruise or two, and our muscles ache for a few days after we shovel. If we have travel plans we always get there ... eventually. We come out wiser and with greater ammunition for the next winter storm.

In summer, thunderstorms are much more frequent, with lightning, flooding rains, damaging winds, hail, and even on rare occasion a tornado. Sometimes these catch us off guard, leaving us with a mad dash to the car when a downpour comes. We at times have to postpone those weekend plans until the storms stay away. Even if strong winds bring down limbs onto our roofs, we can deal with that, thanks to the help of a neighbor or qualified professional. We come out wiser and with greater ammunition for the next round of storms.

One of the reasons I chose the Miami Valley to work and live is because of the varied weather this region sees. While I enjoy the variability from day to day and week to week the most, sometimes those unexpected changes can bring about uncertainty if not concern. The weather, like many other aspects of life, is to a large degree predictable. It is when the unpredictable arises that we sometimes need to turn elsewhere, for information, for help, for insight, or just for reassurance.

I strongly believe that the most important keys to dealing with life's challenges are knowledge we get from education and personal experience. Combining the two makes us powerful creatures on this planet, equipped to deal with just about anything. If we have little or no experience or knowledge, however, life can throw a curveball that can result in not only defeat, but tremendous anxiety and fear along the way.

A good example of this is what all of us dealt with a year ago or so. The windstorm from the remnants of Hurricane Ike was like nothing the Miami Valley had ever seen, at least in our lifetimes. Hurricane-force winds felled trees by the thousands, and power outages were not only widespread, but long lived. Going a few days without lights was one thing, but weeks without lights, refrigeration, and power for a well to supply water made this time extremely trying for some of us. It took a bit longer to recover, but we all made it through this crisis as well, because there were places and people to whom we could turn: neighbors, municipal services, and qualified professionals.

One of the aspects of the windstorm that made it so unique was the lack of warning, relatively speaking. When a snowstorm comes, you get ample warning most of the time. Ok, so maybe we get four inches of snow when we expect two, but almost always you know snow is on the way. In the summer thunderstorms are forecast fairly well. When damaging storms hit the area they are almost always preceded by a thunderstorm or tornado watch or warning. This important information is crucial for us to prepare for what is on the way, both physically and mentally.

The windstorm was not expected, at least not to the degree that we saw. The impact was extreme, but also unforeseen to all, and most importantly we were not physically or mentally prepared. This created a true life crisis situation. Many of us probably asked the same questions: *What's going on? Why is this happening? How long will this last? Will it get worse? How will I deal with all of this?* Thankfully there were places to turn for information, education, and help. Local media (only through battery powered radio for some) stepped up to be a resource and information source as they have for generations. But those sources can be counted on in a weather crisis. You knew where to go to get the information and help you needed. What about other life crises; would you know where to turn to then?

Several years ago I asked myself the exact questions you see above. It had nothing to do with the weather. Instead we were realizing my grandfather was suffering from an affliction. It started with some forgetfulness, nothing to be too concerned about with someone over 80 years of age we thought. Over time the memory issues increased. Confusion crept into my grandfather's life, a lack of desire to bathe or dress on a daily basis. Then one day he was pulled over by a police officer because he drove around a block several times. He simply could not remember how to get home. It took a situation like that to really open our eyes. But unfortunately we waited far too long. Alzheimer's disease was taking over his life.

It was hardest on me I thought, living hundreds of miles away. I only saw him a few times a year, and by that point the progression was difficult to deal with on my part. It was hardest on me ... I thought. It wasn't. It was far more difficult for my grandmother, his primary caregiver. In her 80s herself, she was now facing the task of providing for and taking care of a husband with Alzheimer's, as well as taking care of herself. As many who deal with the disease find out, that task can be simply too much. She suffered a stroke and was no longer able to care for my grandfather.

Medical care at this point would be left up to qualified professionals, but there were many aspect of their life still to be attended to: legal decisions, financial matters and such. In stepped my mother and sister, to be the family support that is vital in times like this. The physical distance between my family and I kept me

from helping out very much at this point, and that was very hard for me to handle. Thankfully I had some help and it made a world of difference.

Back when we first suspected Alzheimer's disease may be to blame for the changes my grandfather was going through, we accepted it and moved on. It was to some degree a case of denial. What could we do? We knew we couldn't stop it. Whether it was fate or something else, I had been asked to give a talk, about weather, to a group of Alzheimer's care givers a few years back. It was through this meeting with people from the Miami Valley Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association that I learned what this amazing group had to offer.

First came an understanding that I was not alone, there were others dealing with exactly the same things I was. Next stop was their website, to start my education process. A simple knowledge of where my grandfather was at in his battle with the disease and what was to come next made my periodic visits a bit easier to cope with. I tried to share what I had learned with my mother and sister, so they would know what to expect in the upcoming months and years as well. Over time I learned that they needed help as well, and I became their support group when it got tough for them.

We were lucky as we had time to get their legal and financial situation squared away before they left us in the past few years. We were lucky as family was able to step in and do what family does in times like these. We were lucky that we had each other to lean on when times got tough.

In hindsight we waited too long. If we had realized what was happening sooner perhaps some of these amazing new drugs that slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease could have given us a bit more time together. If we had realized what was happening sooner we may have gotten my grandmother more help, and perhaps that could have prolonged or prevented the stroke she had. If we had realized what was happening sooner perhaps I would have made an effort to see my grandparents more frequently to increase and strengthen the memories that I am left with now.

Perhaps some of you have picked up this booklet because you think you are starting down or are already on a path similar to mine. I encourage you to take a look at the information here, and contact the Alzheimer's Association if you have questions, concerns, or just feel you need some help.

When a storm is on the way you already know where to turn to get the information to get you through. The more warning you have, the easier it is to anticipate and deal with the consequences. Alzheimer's disease is one of life's storms, and it too is easier to endure with proper information and help. You have taken the first step towards weathering this storm.