

Telling Others About an Alzheimer's Diagnosis

When you learn that someone you care about has Alzheimer's, you may hesitate to tell the person that he or she has the disease. You may also have a hard time deciding whether to tell family and friends. Once you are emotionally ready to discuss the diagnosis, how will you break the news? Here are some suggestions for talking about the disease with others.

Respect the person's right to know

- You may want to protect the person by withholding information. But your loved one is an adult with the right to know the truth. It can be a relief to hear the diagnosis, especially if the person had suspected he or she had Alzheimer's disease.
- In many cases, people who are diagnosed early are able to participate in important decisions about their healthcare and legal and financial planning.
- While there is no current cure for Alzheimer's, life will not stop with the diagnosis. There are treatments and services that can make life better for everyone.

Plan how to tell the person

- Talk with doctors, social workers and others who work with people who have Alzheimer's to plan an approach for discussing the diagnosis.
- Consider a "family conference" to tell the person about the diagnosis. He or she may not remember the discussion, but may remember that people cared enough to come together. You may need to have more than one meeting to cover the details.
- Shape the discussion to fit the person's emotional state, medical condition and ability to remember and make decisions.
- Pick the best time to talk about the diagnosis. People with Alzheimer's may be more receptive to new information at different times of the day.
- Don't provide too much information at once. Listen carefully to the person. They often signal the amount of information they can deal with through their question and reactions. Later, you can explain the symptoms of Alzheimer's and talk about planning for the future and getting support.

Help the person accept the diagnosis

- The person may not understand the meaning of the diagnosis or may deny it. Accept such reactions and avoid further explanations.
- If they respond well, try providing additional information.
- The person with Alzheimer's may forget the initial discussion but not the emotion involved. If telling them upsets them, hearing additional details may trigger the same reaction later.

- Reassure your loved one. Express your commitment to help and give support. Let the person know that you will do all you can to keep your lives fulfilling.
- Be open to the person's need to talk about the diagnosis and his or her emotions.
- Look for nonverbal signs of sadness, anger or anxiety. Respond with love and reassurance.
- Encourage the person to join a support group for individuals with memory loss. Your local Alzheimer's Association can help you locate a group. To find an Association near you, please call 1.800.272.3900 or go to www.alz.org.

Telling family and friends

An Alzheimer diagnosis doesn't only affect the person receiving it. The lives of family members and friends may also drastically change.

- Be honest with family and friends about the person's diagnosis. Explain that Alzheimer's is a brain disease, not a psychological or emotional disorder.
- Share educational materials from the Alzheimer's Association. The more that people learn about the disease, the more comfortable they may feel around the person.
- Invite family to support groups sponsored by your local Alzheimer's Association.
- Realize that some people may drift out of your life, as they may feel uncomfortable around the person or may not want to help provide care.
- Alzheimer's disease can also impact children and teens. Just as with any family member, be honest about the person's diagnosis with the young people in your life. Encourage them to ask questions.

The Alzheimer's Association is the world's leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer care, support and research.

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