

Perception: When Seeing is Not Believing

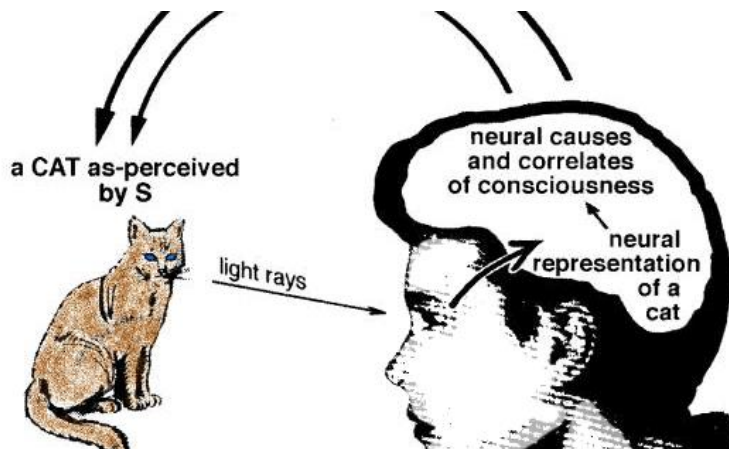
Dementia is an overall loss of cognitive abilities, affecting memory, reasoning, organization, language, attention, abstraction and perception.

In most of these areas, deficits can be easily identified by the caregiver. We can all understand the difficulty someone might have with word finding or performing a multi-step task, such as planning the week's meals.

When it comes to difficulties in perception, and in particular, visual perception, caregivers have a harder time understanding it.

Visual perception is an important brain activity that most of us don't even realize we perform. We trust our eyes to capture images of the world we live in, and we rely on these images to be the correct representation of our environment. "Seeing" appears to be instant and effortless.

Our brains, however, are constantly processing those images, recognizing and charting them against previously acquired knowledge. The brain unconsciously analyses each image's position, movement, size, color and shape, and finally reconstructs those pieces into our own view of the world.



Basically, what we see is what our brains make of the visual images our eyes capture. This is visual perception, and it is a unique experience to each of us.

Visual perception is often affected as dementia progresses. Although the brain continues to work hard to make sense of visual information, it begins to misinterpret what the eyes see.

This may cause some unforeseen challenges to caregivers, who may not notice the perception difficulty because it is something we all do without ever noticing it.

During a recent workshop at the Alzheimer's Association, a family caregiver was surprised with her husband's reaction when he saw the new refrigerator in the kitchen. She had ordered it without consulting him, fearing he would disapprove the large purchase. Being it the same color and general

shape as the previous one, he opened its door, grabbed the milk like he has always done and never noticed any difference. (She is now shopping for a new stove and microwave.)

Another caregiver was puzzled about her loved one with dementia who would mistake some pieces of furniture for a toilet, and would not use the actual toilet. When asked about the color of the bathroom walls and fixtures, the caregiver said they were "all white."

An all-white object against an all-white background may be difficult to be recognized by a brain suffering from impaired perception related to dementia. A simple solution would be installing a colorful toilet seat cover to create a more distinguishable contrast.

Caregivers can modify the environment to better

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California Central Coast Chapter

Santa Barbara County
1528 Chapala St., #204
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
Tel: 805.892.4259

120 E. Jones St, #113
Santa Maria, CA 93454
Tel: 805.636.6432

San Luis Obispo County
71 Zaca Ln Suite 110
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
Tel: 805.547.3830










Ventura County
2580 E. Main St Suite 201
Ventura, CA 93003
Tel: 805.494.5200

24-Hour Helpline:
800.272.3900

alz.org/CaCentral

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Caregiver Tips Home Safety

-  Lock or disguise hazardous areas.
-  Install door locks out of sight.
-  Use safety devices, such as childproof locks and door knobs.
-  Add extra lighting in entries, areas between rooms, stairways, and bathrooms.
-  Diffuse bright light by removing mirrors and glass-top furniture.
-  Avoid scatter rugs. Scatter rugs should be kept at a minimum because they can cause confusion and pose a risk for tripping.
-  Move items such as floor lamps and coffee tables to create safe areas to wander.
-  Regularly clean out the refrigerator and discard inedible food.
-  Use colored dinnerware. *Fiestaware* is a great brand to use because it has bright, solid colors with no distracting patterns.

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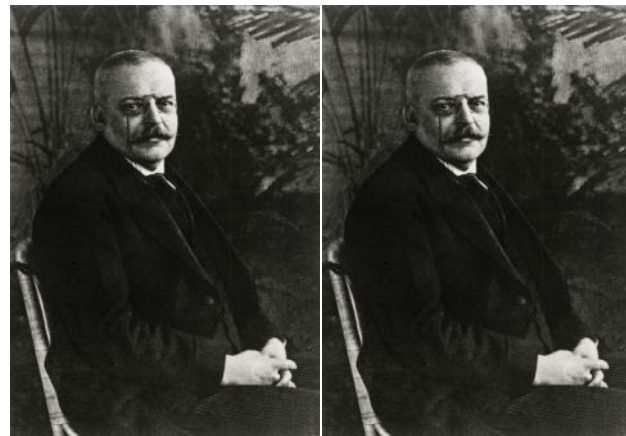
accommodate for changes in visual perception and to avoid confusion. Lighting, visual contrasts between floors and walls and the use of color can help a person with dementia better navigate the surroundings. Proper lighting and contrast between the color of the food and the plates can be used to help a person concentrate when they are trying to eat.

Beware of tile floors with certain patterns that can look like steps and cause the person to become uncertain of their footing and trip. Dark-color area rugs can be seen as holes on the ground and become a barrier to crossing. Mirrors may reflect images that people living with dementia do not recognize as their own and interpreted as a “strange person in the room constantly watching me.” This kind of experiences can be scary and set the mood for the rest of the day.

It’s important to try and recognize elements in the environment that might be contributing to the confusion and causing unwanted behaviors. Slight modifications to accommodate perception deficits can greatly

Stereogram

A fun way to demonstrate how your brain processes visual information is a stereoscopic image. If you can force your eyes to cross or to diverge, so each eye see just one picture, a ghostly third image appears in the center in three dimensions.



enhance the sense of well-being and confidence of a person with dementia.

Many agencies provide home evaluation services to advise caregivers about adaptations to accommodate dementia needs. Please contact the Alzheimer’s Association for a listing of those agencies and for more information on how to best dementia-fit

*Written by Luciana Cramer, Care Specialist
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Helpful Resources:

The National Institute on Aging has numerous resources and publications on Alzheimer’s disease and dementia. For their booklet, *Home Safety for People with Alzheimer’s Disease*, visit: www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/Publications/homesafety.htm

Visit the Safety Center at the Alzheimer’s Association website at alz.org under “We Can Help” to learn more about safety concerns and solutions. www.alz.org/safetycenter

Your local Alzheimer’s Association Office also has numerous books, videos, and handouts available for you to borrow from our library.

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