

The Seven A's of Dementia

The seven A's are one way of understanding the effects of dementia. Each A represents a different kind of loss caused by damage to different areas of the brain. Keep in mind that individuals with dementia will experience different degrees of these losses and may not experience all of them, depending on the kind of dementia they have and how far the disease has progressed.

Anosognosia means loss of insight. When people have anosognosia, they may not recognize that they are ill, and may not understand that they need help. People with dementia may not understand why they have difficulty with memory or that they have a memory problem at all. These people are not in denial; they genuinely do not realize that there is a problem. A caregiver may find this difficult, as people with dementia may refuse help because they do not recognize that it is needed.

Amnesia refers to loss of memory. People usually lose their short-term memory early on in the disease. As the disease progresses, their long term memory will also be affected. For example, people with dementia may not remember what they had for breakfast, but they will remember details of their wedding day. Learning is especially difficult without short term memory because new information will not be retained in the memory. However, people with dementia may learn something new by performing the same task over and over again. An example of this could be that after a person with dementia moves into a Long Term Care Home, he/she will be able to learn where the dining room is after repeatedly being taken there.

Agnosia means a loss of recognition of information coming from any of the senses: sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. Individuals who experience this loss may have difficulty recognizing familiar people in their lives. They may not recognize themselves in the mirror or could possibly believe their reflection in the mirror is another person in the room. Everyday sounds, like birds chirping may be distressing to them, as they no longer recognize what makes that sound.

Safety becomes an issue when individuals lose the ability to recognize things such as fire alarms, or the smell of smoke, or objects and what they are for (e.g. using a knife as a pencil).

Aphasia means loss of language, and can include either speech, comprehension, or both. Speaking abilities remain for some time after the onset of Alzheimer's disease, but the ability to understand what other people are saying may become affected earlier in the disease process. People who have Frontal Temporal Dementia often retain the ability to understand what is said to them but lose the ability to speak earlier in the disease process. People who have learned a second language will eventually lose the ability to communicate in this language and revert to their native language.

Apraxia is a loss of ability to initiate purposeful movement. As well, individuals with apraxia often lose the ability to sequence or do things in order. A person with dementia might put on his/her shoes before putting on his/her socks. Individuals may also have trouble understanding terms such as back, front, up, down, left, right. As a result of these losses, it becomes difficult to do things such as tying shoelaces, doing up buttons and zippers, or any activity involving co-ordination. Loss of patterns of movement will result in the eventual inability to co-ordinate hand and leg movements necessary for specific activities such as driving. As in amnesia, these abilities are lost in the opposite way to how they were learned. In the early stages, an individual might have trouble with the buttons on the

computer, or TV. As the disease progresses driving and cooking might be lost. In the later stages these individuals will not be able to do tasks such as dressing or personal care.

Altered perception is the misinterpretation of sensory information. An example of this would be mistaking a coat rack in the corner for another person. Often behaviour becomes more dysfunctional and problematic in the late afternoon or early evening when light levels diminish. People with dementia are less able to distinguish things if they cannot see them clearly and this can cause distress and anxiety. This pattern of behaviour is known as “sundowning”.

An additional significant perception loss is failure of depth perception or the ability to see in three dimensions. It becomes more challenging to judge how high, deep, long, wide, near or far things are. For example, if the floor and furniture are the same colour, it may be difficult for a person with dementia to judge when he/she is close enough to the chair to sit down.

Apathy refers to the loss of initiative or drive. The part of the brain that controls initiation of activity or communication is damaged. People that are apathetic may seem depressed. In fact, they may not become involved in conversation or an activity because they no longer think to do so. They lack self motivation. The caregiver must encourage the person with dementia to become involved or participate in things as much as possible. We see apathy in the person who sits staring out the window for hours, but is quite happy to do an activity once the caregiver has encouraged him/her to become involved.

If you have any questions, please email us at pec@alzheimerontario.org