

Dementia and Beyond: Working with Intellectually Disabled Adults Meeting the Challenges of Aging

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Expected Changes with Normal Aging

- Aging results from a combination of many factors.
- Processes slow down and structures become more fragile and brittle.
- Sensory changes.

What's not normal?

	Normal	Not normal
Vision	Trouble seeing things close up, loss of peripheral vision, loss of depth perception	Loss of central vision, blind spots, blindness (progressive or sudden), eye pain, cloudy eyes
Hearing	Harder to hear high pitched sounds, difficulty distinguishing sounds from background noise	Pain or discharge from ears, sudden (rather than gradual) loss of hearing, decrease in ability to hear after an illness or injury
Touch, taste, smell	Gradually decreased ability to taste and smell. Decreased sensitivity to temperature and pain.	Loss of sensation due to stroke or other neurological damage. Often unilateral.

Normal vs. Abnormal (cont.)

	Normal	Not normal
Speech	Does not normally change	Loss of speech, word finding difficulty, slurred speech
Central Nervous System	<p>Decreased ability to thermoregulate</p> <p>Decreased processing speed</p> <p>Decreased memory of things newly learned</p> <p>Brain shrinks</p> <p>Sleep cycles change to more naps per day and less night time hours slept</p>	<p>Alzheimers, dementia, Parkinson's, stroke, Decreased brain cells due to injury, infection, or environmental factors, substance abuse</p>

Change and Loss: not necessarily normal but common

- Loss of friends, family, staff
- Change in living situation
- Change or loss of work

So we've noticed a change, now what?

Is it treatable/reversible?

Is it dementia?

How do we adjust to the “new normal”?

Delerium

- Confused thinking
- Behavioral changes
- Emotional changes
- Decreased awareness of environment
- Rapid onset (hours to days)
- Fluctuates (often worse at night)
- Reversed sleep wake cycle
- May have frightening hallucinations
- Often reversible

Possible Causes of Delirium

- Infection
- Metabolic imbalance
- Anesthesia
- Medications, street drugs, alcohol
- Withdrawal
- Malnutrition or dehydration
- Sleep deprivation
- Severe emotional stress
- pain

Depression

- Gradual onset (weeks to months)
- More trouble making decisions
- Often says “I don’t know”
- Loss of interest, sad, hopeless
- Memory usually intact, focus on sad memories
- May sleep more, early morning awakening
- May seem anxious or fearful or complain of physical symptoms

Dementia

- Slow and progressive onset (years)
- Gradual loss of cognition and ability to solve problems
- Will answer questions but may not make sense
- Sleep usually normal in early stages. Later becomes fragmented (cat naps)
- May have delusions based on old behavior or memories. Misperception, especially in low light.
- May have emotional changes, becoming angry, fearful, or paranoid.

Coping strategies for dementia

- Exercise
- Communication
- Consistent approach
- Calm and organized environment

Specific Issues

- Repetitive behavior
- Depression and anxiety
- Aggression and agitation
- Inappropriate sexual behavior
- Wandering
- Shadowing
- Sundowning

Down Syndrome and Dementia

- Life expectancy for persons with Down Syndrome has increased dramatically
- Living situations have changed
- Persons with Down Syndrome develop Alzheimer's type dementia earlier and at a higher rate than other people
- Early signs may be agitation, apathy, difficulty remembering, increased behavioral problems (aggression, tantrums)
- Adult onset seizures, sleep disturbance, loss of coordination

Down Syndrome and Dementia

- Important to document baseline function before age 35
- First indicator is often change in day to day function (ADL's)

Approach to a Person with Change in Personality, Function, Behavior, or Cognition

- Recognize that this is not normal (importance of baseline)
- Thorough medical workup to rule out treatable causes
- Assess for depression or other treatable mental illness
- Focus on positive, support as needed

Resources

- Washington State Developmental Disabilities Administration (www.dshs.wa.gov/dda)
- National Down Syndrome Society (www.ndss.org)
- The ARC (www.thearc.com)
- American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (www.aaid.org)
- National Task Group on Intellectual Disabilities and Dementia Practices (www.aadmd.org/ntg)

Questions?