

The Catholic Doctor Is In: Coping with the Burden of Dementia

One of my greatest fears is developing dementia when I finally get to the golden years. I have had many close family members get dementia and a positive family history is a risk factor for developing dementia.

Alzheimer's dementia accounts for between 60-80 percent of all cases and is the type most are familiar with. But there are many variations. They include dementia with Lewy bodies, frontotemporal dementia, vascular (multi-infarct) dementia, and Parkinson disease with dementia.

As the world's population ages the burden of dementia is increasing worldwide. There are an estimated 5 million people now in the United States that have dementia. When a member of your family gets dementia it can be devastating and not only effect the entire family but friends, coworkers and the community as well.

There are medicines and therapies that can slow down the progression for several years, but invariably there is steady progression until memory is lost and the person lives in a state of confusion. From the research that I have reviewed I am not optimistic of a major treatment breakthrough in the next few years.

There are things you can do to reduce your risk of getting dementia. Keeping a high level of social activity is a positive, as is staying mentally engaged. Retirement without a plan of keeping your brain stimulated could be a problem. Also there is a clear reduction in the onset of dementia in those that exercise regularly.

I frequently feel like I have all kinds of problems with memory — “Where did I put my keys?” “Why did I just walk upstairs to my bedroom and now can't remember why I am standing here.” Here is the good news for all of you reading this with similar concerns. Self-reported memory loss does not seem to correlate with the subsequent diagnosis of dementia. Those with dementia usually have no clue they are developing memory loss but rather it is their family that notices changes in memory and thinking. So if you are analytical enough to think you are getting dementia you probably are not.

My mother had dementia for over 10 years before she died. My family was blessed by the fact that my mother was one of the happy ones. I have helped care for hundreds of patients with dementia over the years and it usually goes one of two ways: pleasantly confused or nasty and belligerent.

To be the primary caregiver and not only have to deal with the mental confusion, but in addition, be verbally abused can be overwhelming. Believe me when I tell you that those afflicted with dementia have little control over what they say and two minutes later won't remember they said it. The caregivers that can get through this and still smile invariably have a deep faith and are usually also dedicated to daily prayer and Scripture reading. How else could they survive?

Many spouses take care of their loved ones at home as long as they can and I think this is more than admirable. It is truly God's work and one of His highest callings. In my mother's case my father had already died and we could not provide the care she needed so we had to make the decision to place her in a dementia unit in a nursing home. We were blessed by a wonderful and dedicated staff and my mother was happy and well cared for till the end.

To those out there caring for a loved one with dementia at home, my advice is to give it all you have, but recognize that in a significant percentage of people with dementia there comes a time when you can no longer handle things alone and they are actually better off and safer in a nursing home setting.

You also need to ask for help. Ask your family and friends to help out to give you an occasional time of respite. You also need to ask for help from the various social agencies available such as the Alzheimer's Association (alz.org). Consider becoming part of an Alzheimer's support group. Ultimately to survive this challenging time you have to seek out and accept the graces the Holy Spirit will bring to you if you ask.

As it says in Galatians 6:2: "Help carry one another's burdens; in that way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Finally, Mathew 5:16: "In the same way, your light must shine before men so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father." If you look at your situation in terms of it being an opportunity to serve your loved one and therefore serve the Lord, you should not only find strength needed to carry on but also find peace.

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