

Evidence-based Distinctions between Age-related Memory Loss and Dementia

Summarized by John VanDenBerg, Ph.D.

1. Memory lapses in age-related normal memory loss: the memory lapses are irritating but not disabling. Basic life functioning continues. Virtually all people over 75 experience brief memory loss. Typically, this involves remembering events, names, words – all of which they used to know. This type of memory loss increases with age.

Memory lapses in dementia-related memory loss: the memory lapses are disabling, and often cause the older person to have difficulty getting through their day. They often no longer remember the name or face of those they have known all of their lives. Formerly everyday items may no longer be familiar. They may lose their glasses frequently, but often no longer know what glasses are for. They may misplace car keys, but then not know what car keys are.

2. Problem solving in age-related normal decline: the elder person still has basic problem solving skills, even if problems are not as quickly solved as earlier in their life. For example, if making a recipe and having to substitute ingredients because they are out of some key ingredient, they can problem solve using other ingredients or borrowing something from a neighbor.

Problem solving in dementia: the elder person has great difficulty reasoning their way through a problem to a solution, and often quits in frustration. For example, they may need to open a new tube of toothpaste, but do not remember where the extra toothpaste is stored. They go without toothpaste rather than ask someone else, or try to buy more.

3. Completing familiar tasks for age-related normal decline: the elder person can complete familiar, everyday tasks. They may be 50% or more slower at task completion, but they can do the task. For example, they may take twice as long to clean their bathroom, but with persistence, they can do the job.

Completing familiar tasks in dementia: The elder person with dementia may draw a complete blank when faced with a familiar task. Early on in dementia, they may be able to do familiar tasks at times, but in later stages, they often lose most ability to complete tasks. For example, they may know their bathroom is in need of cleaning, but are unable to clean it, organize the steps of cleaning, or know what cleaning products to use.

4. Confusion in time and space for age-related normal decline: The elder person may occasionally not track the time of day or at times get temporarily confused about where they are. Almost all elders experience momentary confusion. For example, they are walking through a grocery store they have shopped at for years, and just for a second, the aisles look unfamiliar. These moments are irritating, but do not necessarily signify dementia.

Confusion in time and space for elders with dementia: The elder person with dementia may frequently lose complete tracking of the time and where they are. For example, when asked what time it is, they may not even know how to tell time, or when looking at a clock, don't know what it means. They often get lost even in their own house, and especially if out walking or even driving.

5. Spatial and visual-related tasks. The elder with age-related decline may occasionally have trouble with movement and balance, such as placing an item in its correct place. For example, in reaching for an item off a high shelf, they may experience a bit of vertigo and weave their body back and forth. They may increasingly look at an array of items and not be able to quickly find what they are looking for.

Spatial and visual-related tasks. The elder with dementia may have great difficulty understanding where things should go, where their body should be in their immediate environment, and have balance problems movement and in handling items. For example, they may look into their bathroom drawer and not be able to see where things are located, even though the items are in plain view.

6. Following conversations: The elder with normal cognitive decline may have to expend more effort to follow the direction and content of a conversation. This can be frustrating but they can get the overall gist of a conversation.

Following conversations: The elder with dementia often cannot understand the sequence and content of what others are saying, and frequently wander off into their own talk that may have nothing to do with the conversation they are having with someone else.

7. Poor judgement. The elder with normal cognitive decline may occasionally make impulsive or poorly thought out decisions or judgements but is able to function fairly normally in managing their lives. This often involves a shortage of mental energy rather than actual poor judgement. When these elders are prompted to go a bit slower in decision making, they can in fact use better judgement.

Poor judgement. The elder with dementia is often simply not able to make decisions or judgements about persons or situations, which can put them at risk for normal functioning. They also often don't remember decisions or judgements they made even minutes prior. For example, they may decide to avoid walking on an unstable surface, then just a minute later go right ahead and walking on the unsafe surface without remembering their earlier rationale for not walking.

8. Interactions with family and friends. The elder with normal cognitive decline will often seek out more interactions with family and friends, and value human interaction. Of course, if the elder had been anti-social, they may continue in that way. Aging often accelerates pre-aging personality traits. The kind and gentle person becomes even more kind and gentle. The narcissistic person becomes even more self-absorbed.

Interactions with family and friends. The elder with dementia will often seem withdrawn because they do not hold interactions in their minds for long. Their world moves on moment by moment without a great deal of contemplation of their situation. At times, the elder with dementia reacts to interactions with family and friends with "an attitude" when what they are really feeling is confusion.

Other common dynamics encountered when interacting with elders with dementia:

Repetition. As memory declines and the ability to hold thoughts in mind begins to go away, the elder may ask the same question or make the same statement over and over again. Just repeat your normal response, don't tell them they just said that.

Avoid using normal reasoning and logic. Being around an elder with dementia can be frightening for friends and family, who are often tempted to try and get the elder to think normally. For example, a son may say "Dad, you know that you can make scrambled eggs, you have done it a thousand times". A daughter may say "Mom, just think, you remember your sister's name."

"Sundowners". Many elders with dementia experience a dynamic called Sundowners. Their state of confusion gets much worse in the evening.

Cloaking. A dynamic named "cloaking" can often exist for the elder with dementia. They are embarrassed by their decline, and expend lots of mental energy trying to hide what they are really feeling. The elder who is good at cloaking can appear fairly normal for 5-20 minutes, but what is going on inside their heads is far from normal. Cloaking almost always leads to exhaustion and eventually, the elder is no longer able to cloak.

Focus on the elder's strengths and preferences. Many elders, even in depths of dementia, still get joy from some key things. For example, one elder could not tell you what fudge was or that it had been her favorite candy, but when presented with a piece, was delighted by the taste. Another elder, when music from her teen years was played, could sing along with the words even though she could not remember the singer's name. Another elder loved to sit near a stream and listen to the water, and smiled whenever she did that. Another elder loved rides in the car. A common joy is looking through old pictures. A father who was at advanced stages of dementia and could no longer talk well, read or understand most visual things like TV shows, was shown a photo of his parents and said "That is my Mom and Dad!" Just remember that joy in the moment, whether it is fudge or music, is still joy.

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Disclaimer. This research and other information was summarized by John VanDenBerg, Ph.D., whose parents both had dementia in their last years. John notes that as a child psychologist, he is not an expert in dementia or aging, but bases examples on personal experience with his parents and other friends and relatives who have dementia.

