

Aging Happens: 'Don't you remember what I just told you?'

By Ellen Waldman

August 30, 2015

Just this week, a client's daughter, Anne, told me about her frustration with her mother, Molly. Molly kept asking for some information about her finances, and Anne kept repeating that she already told her what she wanted to know several times. Anne finally asked her, "Don't you remember what I just told you?" The short answer is: "no."

Molly's ability to retain the information she so desperately seeks is not sticking in her mind. This prompted Anne to raise her voice and become impatient, once again. Normally a kind person, she never intended to be acting this way. Usually, Anne and Molly actually enjoy one another's company, but things have changed dramatically in recent months. Molly is continuing in her decline of cognitive capacity and nothing is going to change this inevitable slide. Very sad, and very true, at least at this point with our current medical ability (or lack of it) to stop this from happening.

What is often needed at this point, and what is often missing after the diagnosis of dementia, is more formal information and training for family care providers. What helps a great deal is to attend in-person support and informational groups.

These are not groups of complainers whining about how difficult things are. These groups provide grounded, sensible and effective ways to approach an often very complicated situation. For those who have recently been diagnosed, support groups provide time to explore what this means to them, and what they might expect down the line.

One such local offering comes through The Memory Works Project, providing an eight-week Care Partnering series that begins at 3 p.m. Aug. 24. This is supported by both The Memory Works Project, under Southern Oregon Friends of Hospice (SOFOH), and the Alzheimer's Association. There is no cost involved in these support group sessions. Groups are generally kept to 10 or fewer people.

This upcoming series is for those recently diagnosed with dementia and their spouse, adult children or partners. The two groups, caregivers and care receivers, meet at the same time. Individuals can attend without their significant other, although it would be ideal if they both attended. Participants receive resources and suggestions about issues including driving, anger management, accessing the medical community, behaviors and caregiver self-care.

The format is informal and based upon deep listening, sharing problems, problem-solving and access to resources. The facilitators are Elizabeth V. Hallett, Jerry Hauck and Ellen Gardner. Pre-registration is required. They request an interview with each person interested in joining the groups in order to assess appropriateness. For more information, call Elizabeth at 541-292-2106.

Around the Valley, there are many other groups which provide support to families coping with this situation. I am including Medford, since they all happen on different days and times. Also, try out several, since each has their own particular focus and flavor, until you find one or more that fits for you. You can locate them by calling any of these providers: Medford Senior Center, 510 East Main St.,

Medford, call Lori at 541-772-2230; Farmington Square, 1530 Poplar Drive, Medford, or Prestige Senior Living Arbor Place, 3150 Juanipero Drive Medford, 541-773-5380, call D'Anne at 541-770-9080; or Westminster Presbyterian Church, 2000 Oakwood Drive Medford, call Marya Kain at 541-601-5341.

Back to Anne and Molly. With a bit of coaching on better communication styles and approaches, things have generally improved. Here are the main ideas that were incorporated into making communication easier for both of them:

- Never argue. Pointing out the error of someone's memory or confused views never works. Agree, and move on, doing what needs to be done quietly behind the scenes.
- Be patient. It takes a person with cognitive impairment several more moments to answer or respond than normal. Things will happen more slowly.
- Look directly at the person when speaking or listening. Multi-tasking does not work well in these situations.
- Speak slowly and use shorter sentences. If you keep talking, they will have lost you after the first sentence.
- Finally, a calm demeanor works wonders. Another reason to get yourself to a support group and gain more skills.

We are fortunate to have a wide array of available supports here. Someone once said that it's helpful to think of this as a marathon, not a sprint. You're in this for the long-term and need all the training you can get.