



It's time to talk about brain health.

Have you been noticing changes in an adult in your life? Perhaps the individual is having a hard time remembering things. He or she may act differently or struggle with everyday activities.

Talking about brain health does not have to be scary. This guide can help you start a conversation about those changes. Use it to talk with family, close friends and healthcare professionals.

It is normal for our brains to change as we get older.

As we age, our brains grow older, too. Some changes can be the result of normal aging.

Some examples of normal changes are:

- Small changes in daily activities, such as less driving.
- Some difficulty making decisions and understanding instructions.
- Occasional forgetfulness.
- Forgetting events and people from a long time ago.

What if the changes are not normal?

You may notice changes beyond those listed above. Use this guide to create a plan and help the person you care for get the support they need using the resources listed in this tool kit.



Did you know?

There are a number of reasons why an older person may be having memory problems. These include medications, vitamin deficiencies, thyroid problems, and depression. Alzheimer's disease and other dementias also cause memory problems in older adults. It's important to remember that not all changes in memory mean that a person may have Alzheimer's or a related dementia.



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BRAIN HEALTH BASICS

Staying healthy as we get older can improve our day-to-day life. Like our bodies, it is important to keep our brains in good shape. Your brain health depends on a couple of factors — your genetic makeup, your environment, and your health decisions.

As the National Institutes for Health and other experts explain, diseases and conditions that affect brain health include:

- Certain medicines, smoking, and excessive alcohol
- Health problems like diabetes and heart disease
- Diseases like depression and Alzheimer's
- Brain injury
- Poor diet, insufficient sleep, lack of physical and social activity

The good news is that there are healthy choices you can make as a family to improve brain health. These include:

- **Eating a healthy diet.** “You are what you eat” may sound cliché, but keep in mind that many of the things we do for heart health are also good for the brain. Choose colorful dark-skinned fruits and vegetables, whole grains, Omega-3 fatty acids (salmon, sardines), and anti-oxidants (blueberries, walnuts). Monitor intake of red meats, fried and processed foods, saturated fats and trans-fatty acids, salt, and added sugar. Consult a healthcare professional for additional dietary recommendations.
- **Challenge your brain.** Take the time to participate in tasks that challenge your brain, like playing an instrument, doing word or number puzzles, or learning a new language.
- **Find ways to keep your loved one socially active.** Invite the person you care for to events with their family and friends.
- **Exercise together.** There are lots of great exercises that can be done together, such as walking, swimming, dancing, or other group exercise programs. Before beginning any exercise regimen, be sure to check with the individual's doctor.
- **Help the person you care for get a good night's sleep.** The National Institute on Aging has information on how to improve your sleep health at www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/good-nights-sleep.

For more information on brain health as you age, visit <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/brain-health-resource>



STEP 3: TALK WITH THE HEALTHCARE TEAM

This chart will help you identify the next steps. Don't be afraid to ask for help from other friends and family members. It's best that you are not doing everything alone.

HEALTH CARE ACTION STEPS	FRIEND OR FAMILY WHO WILL HELP
<p>GO WITH THE OLDER ADULT TO A MEDICAL APPOINTMENT AND SHARE YOUR CONCERNS.</p> <p>Bring your conversation notes, including changes that you've noticed.</p> <p>Questions for the healthcare provider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask if the changes that you and others have noticed are normal, and if not, what might be causing these changes. • Ask about whether a "cognitive assessment" might be appropriate. This is a test to determine if the older person has changes in memory or brain function. • If the person you are caring for is a Medicare beneficiary, ask the doctor about the Medicare Annual Wellness Exam, which is free for Medicare beneficiaries and includes a cognitive assessment. <p>Learn more at: https://www.medicare.gov/coverage/preventive-visit-and-yearly-wellness-exams.html</p> <p>YOU MAY WANT TO GET A FREE, CONFIDENTIAL MEMORY SCREENING BEFORE GOING TO MEDICAL APPOINTMENT.</p> <p>A memory screening is a simple, non-invasive test that takes less than 10 minutes. A qualified health professional conducts the screening.</p> <p>These screenings are designed to measure memory, thinking, and language skills. A screening is not a diagnosis of any kind, but scoring below the normal threshold can suggest that someone should follow up with a physician for a thorough evaluation. After the screening, the older adult will receive a letter that can be shared with the healthcare team, including a doctor.</p> <p>FIND A SCREENING NEAR YOU AT www.afascreenings.org/search-us OR BY CALLING 866-232-8484.</p>	



STEP 4: DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

Working with the person you care for and your friends and family, use this chart to identify next steps.

FAMILY ACTION STEPS	FRIEND OR FAMILY WHO WILL HELP
<p>LEARN ABOUT ABOUT BRAIN HEALTH AND HOW BRAINS CHANGE AS WE AGE. Use the resources suggested in this guidebook, which are gathered from trustworthy sources including the National Institute on Aging, the Cleveland Clinic, and Mayo Clinic, among others. Learn more on page 8.</p>	
<p>FIND LOCAL RESOURCES THAT CAN HELP YOUR LOVED ONE STAY SAFE AND HEALTHY AS THEY GROW OLDER.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Eldercare Locator is a public service that will help you find information on senior services near you. Learn more by calling 800-677-1116 or visiting www.eldercare.gov. • Reach out to the Alzheimer's Foundation of America's national toll-free helpline, which is staffed by licensed social workers, at 866-232-8484. The helpline can provide caregiving tips and strategies, as well as referrals to local resources. 	
<p>CONTINUE TO NOTICE CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR, TAKE NOTES, AND PLAN TO DISCUSS AGAIN AS A FAMILY.</p> <p>We will discuss again on _____ [date, time]</p> <p>at _____ [location].</p>	



**LET'S TALK
BRAIN HEALTH!**

#TalkBrainHealth

FAMILY PERSPECTIVES

Carolyn*



We were driving in our truck with the camper attached to the back. I just didn't realize how bad it was. I asked my husband if he was able to just drive in a straight line down the highway, so I could get a break. We got to a four way stop with a flashing red signal and he didn't stop. There we were, with our truck towing along a trailer in the back. Luckily, the car to the left of us stopped. I told my husband, 'We could have been seriously injured or killed!'

Our children were concerned and started noticing signs too. They'd say 'What's going on with dad?' Our young grandchild was even seeing signs too. They would see how frustrated my husband would

get because he couldn't track the conversation. My husband would often say 'I don't understand you.' There were a lot of breakdowns in communication.

I knew my husband had issues for a while. We finally went to the neurologist and they did a bunch of tests. They determined he had frontotemporal dementia. He also has Parkinsonian-type symptoms, which means difficulty walking and balancing. I couldn't say I was surprised with this diagnosis. Luckily we have two wonderful kids. We work together as a family to understand his diagnosis. When he's holding our youngest grandchild, we are on top of it! We all just understand there are some adjustments that need to be made.

Jessica*



I watched my grandmother live with Alzheimer's disease. I cried knowing she was losing the life she loved so much, at least her ability to live it as she once had. Now I see that in my dad.

I wanted to talk with him, create the space to listen, and let him know he's not alone, and doesn't need to hide anything.

I remember it clearly. I was home for a weekend, sitting with him in the bedroom. I told my dad that I wanted him to talk with a doctor I knew — that I wanted to know what is happening with him, and to see if there was anything that could be done. "Why go to a

doctor? What can they tell me? I don't want to end up like my mother and my uncle. I don't want to know."

Crying, I told him I need him to be around, that there are so many things he needs to be present for. "Do this for me. Who knows? Maybe it's something that can be resolved, maybe there is a trial. Please."

He said he'll do it for me. And he did. It's Alzheimer's disease. He is now in a clinical trial; he knows there is no cure, but for my siblings' and my sake, he wants to help, to make sure something is discovered so we don't have to live with his fear, of losing his memory of a life he loves.

*Name has been changed to protect the caregiver's privacy.



RECOMMENDED READING

Brain Health

What is Brain Health?

<http://www.brainhealth.gov>

Mayo Clinic: Memory Loss—7 Tips to Improve Your Memory

<http://bit.ly/MemoryHealth>

Cleveland Clinic: Healthy Brains Initiative

<https://healthybrains.org/healthy-brains-initiative>

National Academies: Brain Health Action Guide for Individuals and Families

<http://bit.ly/AgingBrainActionGuide>

Memory Changes – What's Normal?

WebMD: Is Your Memory Normal?

<http://www.webmd.com/alzheimers/features/is-your-memory-normal>

Mayo Clinic: Memory Loss – When to Seek Help

<http://bit.ly/WhenToSeekHelp>

Alzheimer's Foundation of America: Brain Health and Wellness

<http://www.alzfdn.org/BrainHealth/successfulaging.html>

Alzheimer's Foundation of America: Benefits of Early Detection of Memory Problems

<http://www.alzfdn.org/BrainHealth/memoryscreenings.html>

National Alliance for Caregiving: What Made You Think Mom Had Alzheimer's?

<http://www.caregiving.org/data/NAC%20Alzheimers0411.pdf>

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Many thanks go to our Advisory Committee of subject matter experts, listed at www.caregiving.org/talkbrainhealth