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ADDRESSING ALZHEIMER'S

Compassion, awareness are key

Common yet deadly, Alzheimer's disease impacts over 5.5 million Americans

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060021-AlzheimersAwareness-2.jpg)

At her Bronx caregiving company Right at Home, Enrie Morales and her employees routinely treat Alzheimer's patients — the recipients of these stuffed animals. It's estimated some 5.5 million Americans — most older than 65 — have Alzheimer's disease, making it one of the most common fatal illnesses in the country.

Hiram Alejandro Durán



By ROSE BRENNAN

Paulaida Rosas is a proud woman. Family and close friends know her as “Chickie,” and few if any can deny how much pride she has. In fact, when she lived at Skyview-on-the-Hudson, she’d push around a shopping cart so people didn’t know she needed a walker.

After her husband died, Chickie herself realized she wasn’t getting any younger. It wasn’t long before she welcomed a health aide into her home. That was nothing too serious. But as time went on, her son Howard started noticing some things were just not quite right with her.

“She had ability, in terms of daily living,” Howard said. “She would take a shower, no problems. But she would leave the water running maybe 30 minutes.”

Following a medical emergency in late 2018 that landed her in the hospital, Chickie kept reiterating her desire to go home. That’s not an uncommon wish from a hospital bed. But it wasn’t the homesickness that worried Howard. It was that Chickie didn’t really know where she was.

Once Chickie left the hospital, she headed to the Hebrew Home of Riverdale for rehabilitation. Her memory lapses only got worse, and Howard made the decision to make her temporary stay there permanent. That way Chickie could get the day-to-day assistance she needed.

“By the time she got to the Hebrew Home, those were two different environments in two or three weeks,” Howard said. “And I think that threw her off, without a doubt.”

Chickie is not alone. Millions of Americans suffer from some sort of memory loss or memory-related disease. And November spotlights one of the most common — yet most deadly — forms of memory loss.

It’s Alzheimer’s Awareness Month, and many might not know just how wide-ranging it truly is. Alzheimer’s is the sixth most common cause of death in America, according to the National Institutes of Health. Some estimates even place it as high as third, after heart disease and cancer.

Regardless, Alzheimer’s is quite a common disease in America, and the NIH estimates some 5.5 million Americans — most of them older than 65 — have Alzheimer’s.

Because the disease is irreversible, an Alzheimer’s diagnosis can be a scary one both for the patient and for their loved ones. But even if it’s scary, knowing the warning signs, symptoms and interacting with someone with the disease is necessary for the patient’s well-being in the final years of their life.

Enrie Morales is the owner of Right at Home, a Bronx-based in-home care company. She's also somewhat of an expert on Alzheimer's. Not only is she certified in dementia and cognitive support by the National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners, her mother is among those living with Alzheimer's.

Morales' company focuses on what she calls "person-centered care." While Alzheimer's is an increasingly common disease in America, everyone's experience with it is different.

"We treat each person as an individual because each dementia is different in how the person reacts," Morales said. "While one person might feel a lot of anxiety because they're alone, another person might feel anxiety because they're being paid too much attention to, and the family is always on top of them."

Alzheimer's is somewhat unique among other fatal diseases because, many times, patients can observe initial symptoms of their respective diseases themselves. Heart attack patients feel chest pain, and stroke patients slur their words.

That's not the case with Alzheimer's. Usually, a loved one needs to observe the patient's lapses in memory or forgetfulness — usually the initial symptoms of the disease. And that might be difficult to do until the disease progresses further, because the patient can't communicate their forgetfulness to their loved ones.

But memory loss and forgetfulness aren't the only warning signs of Alzheimer's.

"It includes memory loss that disrupts their daily lifestyle," Morales said. "They'll have challenges in solving problems, or even planning. They'll have difficulties completing familiar tasks. Sometimes they'll be confused as to the time or the place that they're in — problems having conversations, speaking, writing, all of these things."

The cognitive decline of an Alzheimer's patient might be difficult, but according to Anne Weisbrod, the Hebrew Home's social services director, an Alzheimer's diagnosis also can be very difficult for the patient's loved ones — because while the patient can't remember, their loved ones can.

"For families, it's sometimes harder because they lost their relative in some ways," Weisbrod said. "It's not the same person that they knew. It almost sometimes becomes like a different person."

But it's nevertheless important to visit loved ones with Alzheimer's. And while those visits can be difficult, there are ways to navigate them.

When asking an Alzheimer's patient to recall something from the past, according to Hebrew Home therapeutic activities director Catherine Farrell, it's best to prompt memories through non-specific questions.

“You wouldn’t say to somebody, ‘What was it like for you when you were 20?’” Farrell said. “You would say, ‘What do you imagine the story would be for someone who is 20?’ And often ... they just naturally tend to bring up their own memories of when they were 20, without the pressure to ‘remember’ something.”

Farrell also suggested recalling activities or hobbies the patient enjoys, and talking about or even doing those activities.

“Try to use that as a starting point,” Farrell said. “Then, perhaps, bring a golfing magazine for them to just thumb through, or ... read to them the latest article (about) modern art, or anything that has to do with their interest that doesn’t really require them to actually read or to actually engage on a very intellectual level.

While having a loved one with memory loss can be difficult for all parties involved, it’s absolutely essential to continue to connect with each other, because Alzheimer’s patients are more than just their disease.

And for the Rosas, they can keep their relationship alive over something as simple as a favorite beverage.

“She loves making coffee,” Howard said of his mom, Chickie. “She still does. And she always says to me, ‘Can’t you bring me my coffee pot?’”

Keywords

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As of this week, more than 154 million votes were cast in this year's presidential election, representing nearly 74 percent of the country's total population old enough to vote.

It's extraordinary, yet uncommon. Typically, turnout in a presidential election year hovers around 55

