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Dementia

Keeping Dementia at Bay

I used to dismiss this subject out of hand, reasoning I was too young to worry about it. Dementia always fell into the same basket as senility - a ghost that sneaks up as you approach old age. The case of my Aunt seemed to confirm this. My understanding was that she had reached a stage in life which had become too complex and hard to bear, so her mind transported her to a time of simplicity and comfort. She regressed to those halcyon days of youth, of caring parents and no responsibilities; and she relived her childhood right up to the point where, in her estimation, the shine had started to wear off. Then, not wishing to go through the trials of growing up again, she simply hopped and skipped back a few years to replay the happier memories, over and over. They said she had Dementia, a medical term which conjures visions of anguish and suffering. That may well be for friends and relatives who shudder at the thought of slowly losing someone they care about; but for patients like my Aunt, they would seem to reside in a warm bubble guaranteed to keep them safe for the rest of their days. Having rationalised it in this way, I had no fears of being overwhelmed by a condition which isn't really so bad and eventually comes to us all.

That was what I used to think. Recently, however, I am seriously doubting my original philosophy. For a start, not everyone is a candidate. Many ageing citizens, even those in their nineties, are still as bright as a new penny and display few signs of diminished mental capacity. Coming from different walks of life and backgrounds, they would seem to be the lucky winners in life's lottery. But is it merely down to good fortune? Having met some of them, I am convinced there is a common denominator - they all possess the desire and ability to continue doing what they have always done; or make every effort to embrace and adopt new ideas when the old ones are no longer practical. In effect, for them it isn't over till it's over; and even when everyone else is sure they are past their use-by date, they'll be looking for fresh challenges to meet.

There would have to be certain medical conditions that can trigger the onset of Dementia; but in many cases I am sure the battle is still not lost and progress of the ailment can be delayed. There are people, however, who haven't been diagnosed, yet are still at risk because they are either in ignorance of the possibility, or just refuse to accept Dementia is knocking at their door. Maybe that observation sounds harsh, but I think it needs to be. It is definitely not uncalled for. Although I've met people who are determined never to give up, I also know of those who come to accept the inevitable without question. As a result, they often refuse to acknowledge that they can do something positive to help improve their minds and, in turn, their lifestyles.

There's obviously no point in me talking to them here because they won't listen. My message is for their friends and families who recognise the symptoms and are prepared to help them in spite of their reluctance to admit they need any. What are those symptoms? They are actually conspicuous by their absence, mannerisms and actions that used to be prevalent, but of late seem to be fading. Like the sparkle in the eyes at the dawn of a new day and what it might hold; or a lack of enthusiasm when oft-discussed plans for the future are brought up. They just seem to have lost interest in things they were keen on before. You may be wondering what has caused this apparent

dissatisfaction with life in general. Have they recently retired from full-time work? Have they developed a particular medical condition that prevents them from following a favoured occupation or pastime? Most importantly, does their memory seem to be affected to the extent that they are unable to remember how to perform tasks they have been doing all their lives? Admittedly not always, but frequently these small but significant changes are the beginnings of Dementia; and if something isn't done to intervene, this unfortunate person will eventually be seeing friends and loved ones as strangers, only recognising them as memories of the way they were in bygone days!

Loss of short-term memory would seem to be a warning that something is not quite right; but, everyone suffers lapses, even the young, so it tends to be dismissed. I admit to being annoyed with myself when I walk into a room and have to pause because I have forgotten why I was there. I expect my problem, as it is for many, is merely temporary - too much information buzzing around in my head causing confusion and distraction. I imagine it would be the same for anyone experiencing the first stages of Dementia when being faced with an unclear future brought about by a sudden change in circumstances. They must feel that they have turned round to discover the tide of life has gone out leaving them stranded. One moment they had clarity and purpose, the next these undeserving castaways find themselves on a lonely beach staring out at an endless ocean of despair. One might think they would eventually snap out of it and do something: maybe build a raft, or a signal fire; all-too often, however, they have lost their sense of self-worth and convince themselves there is no point in anything anymore, so why bother?

Maybe medical science has not yet found a cure for Dementia, but I believe it can be slowed down, arrested even. My remedy is pretty straightforward - it's about the old dog learning new tricks to re-activate a brain that is becoming sluggish. Once the challenges of full-time work, especially the practical kind, are no longer providing something to think about, lethargy and dissatisfaction take over. Encouraging another interest can be the answer, something to stimulate thought. This might be in the form of a hobby or craft, activities demanding a combination of dexterity and mental skills - like model-making, art, bonsai-growing, pottery; something different to vegetating in front of the TV. The brain needs exercise. Re-introducing the processes of planning and decision-making can lead to a sense of personal achievement. Not everyone, however, is into wood-carving and suchlike, but there must be a multitude of pastimes that can stimulate the mind, make it work again on one of its major talents - focussing on quests and conundrums with a view to resolution.

Whatever the starter, it doesn't need to be complicated: just something simple that improves hand-eye co-ordination with few components. Crosswords would be ideal for someone who enjoys reading; and puzzle games such as the kind found in newspapers and magazines help keep the brain active. Our daughter drew up a Sudoku puzzle on a whiteboard, mainly because it was easy to see and add to. Whenever we were at her place, we were unable to walk past without pausing to ponder. Our current jigsaw on a table always attracts the interest of residents and visitors alike. Brain-teasers like these are ideal therapy; but if they are seen as enjoyable for all, there is less stigma attached. Joint participation at this level is important and can be expanded on with other games - cards, board games, dominos and dice to name a few. It may take a while to coax the troubled person to join in, but if this can be achieved it shouldn't be long before they are looking forward to another session.

Could they possibly be encouraged to take that fearful leap into the cyber world? Trying to convince die-hard cynics to have a dabble on the Internet can be soul-destroying, but

a slowly-slowly approach might work, especially if they are guided towards some area of personal interest. They would benefit from learning within an environment so different to the one they knew before. There can be no precedents to live up to, certainly no expectations other than, hopefully, a desire to use the medium for more than just a look at Facebook or the latest news bulletins. They may even be tempted to try playing a game or two; off-line preferably to start with - later, who knows? Many of the basic match-three games are ideal for stimulating cognitive skills, particular those which are not timed and are therefore unlikely to cause tension and frustration, two elements that need to be avoided. Hidden-object games are also quite laid-back and require focus and concentration. Most importantly, playing games is fun – something that needs to be experienced again, sooner rather than later.

Tempting a stubborn person to do something which takes them out of their comfort zone is never going to be easy; but I feel sure it will be worth the effort in the long run. And here's a thought: you may be in need of similar therapy yourself one day; so getting a bit of practice early in the piece could mean you won't have to argue the toss with some do-gooder because you already know what you have to do to keep your brain functioning properly.

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