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**Programs and
Services**

Helpline

Support Groups

Early Stage Memory
Loss Program

Care Consultation &
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Educational
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Research

Advocacy

Living with Alzheimer's Disease

Helpful Advice for Keeping the Mind and Body Active During the Early Stages

by Karen Vetor, Program Director - Silver Club, Turner Geriatric Center, The University of Michigan

Social connections, continued opportunities to learn, and physical well-being are important throughout our lives and remain equally important to those in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. A member of CoffeeHouse, an early memory loss support group in Ann Arbor, Michigan explains: *"The opportunity to grow as a valued human being continues to be very important. I enjoy the challenge of something new; spontaneity in life gives variety, which is essential to keeping the spark of life alive."*

Living with memory loss poses a unique set of challenges, especially feelings of loneliness, depression, loss of meaning in life, lack of motivation, and dependence. Remaining active helps reduce some of these feelings.

"Keeping the mind active is essential to keeping connected to others and the world around me," says one group member.

Engaging in learning activities can be challenging, since CoffeeHouse members openly admit to forgetting even while trying to participate in new experiences. Members comment that memory aides help them remember; these items help reduce confusion, increase independence, and promote stability in life. Based on their personal experiences with dementia, CoffeeHouse members offer

some helpful hints on how to keep the mind active and/or assist others with remembering:

• **Calendars.** Post calendars in a prominent location such as the refrigerator. Write down appointments; cross off each day. Keep track of visitors — ask them to write their name and time of visit.

• **Clock that keeps time and date.** Large print and battery back-up are important features.

• **Wrist watch with date and large numbers.**

• **Programmable phone and phone list with important numbers and emergency numbers placed next to the phone.** Include emergency contact person and doctor's name, telephone number, and address.

• **Emergency contact card that can be kept in a wallet.** Include name, telephone

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Chapter Offers Early Stage Support Services

Early Stage Support Groups and Care Consultation Services Available

One of the most important aspects of obtaining a diagnosis in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease is the ability to plan for the future. It is in the early stages that the person who has been diagnosed is able to take an active role in making choices about, and planning for, his or her own care, as well as to participate in support groups with other individuals experiencing the same concerns and frustrations.

The Michigan Great Lakes Chapter offers a range of services geared to individuals and families coping with the early stages of memory loss. In the chapter's South Central region, dementia-specific care consultation and counseling services are available. The **Family Connections Care Consultation Program** offers a comprehensive assessment to determine the needs of a person with Alzheimer's and other family members, and also provides education about the disease process and its impact, guidance on legal and financial planning, and information and referral to community

resources. In addition, program staff can give concrete advice and recommendations for improving communication and adapting the physical environment.

The chapter's Southwest and West Shore regions offer **early stage support groups** that meet monthly. The groups are limited in size and interviews with both the person with dementia and a family member are required before the person is accepted into the group. Criteria for admission into the group include a diagnosis of dementia, acceptance of the diagnosis, and the capability of participating in a group setting. Information appropriate to the group is distributed at each meeting (e.g. driving and the latest Alzheimer's research); however, much of the time is spent talking and sharing experiences.

For information on early stage support services provided by the Michigan Great Lakes Chapter, call (800) 337-3827 or (734) 677-3081.

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Communication Tips

Helpful Hints from Individuals with Early Memory Loss

by members of the CoffeeHouse Early Stage Support Group

- ☪ Speak with a smile, "so I know that you care."
A smile takes away tension and helps put me at ease. If you're tense, I feel your tension too.
- ☪ Use language I understand — keep it simple, no jargon or slang.
- ☪ Slow down your speech; speak clearly and concisely.
- ☪ Keep it short and to the point, one idea at a time.
- ☪ Let me take the time to think through what you said to me; remember it takes time to think through the meaning of words.
- ☪ Let me be the leader in the conversation and set the pace. Take turns during the conversation.
- ☪ Take the time to help me get my thoughts out; ask me questions to help clarify my thoughts. Ask me if you can help find the words.
- ☪ Make sure I hear you; ask me if I can hear you and if I understand what you have said. Rephrase information if I'm having trouble understanding.
- ☪ Face me when you talk; eye contact helps get complete attention.

Living with Alzheimer's Disease

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number, and address of person with Alzheimer's; emergency contact person, phone, and address; doctor's name, phone, and address; hospital of choice; and any medical conditions that others should know about in the event of an emergency. (Call the Michigan Great Lakes Chapter office at 734-677-3081 to receive a complimentary wallet card.)

Ø Local map laminated and stored prominently in the car for persons who still drive.

Ø Information on cabs and bus routes as an alternative to driving.

Physical activity is critical to maintaining overall physical functioning, flexibility, and independence. Keeping a regular exercise routine two or three times per week helps to maintain current physical functioning. Exercise is essential to being independent on outings, getting in and out of the car, taking care of personal needs such as dressing, or getting up from a chair.

"Exercise keeps me physically able, strong, and feeling young," comments one group member.

In addition to routine exercise, CoffeeHouse members recommend keeping active in things that have been enjoyed throughout life such as cooking, sewing, taking walks, and music because these things offer both physical and mental stimulation.

Learning about Alzheimer's disease and the most recent research and treatments helps provide a feeling of control and understanding of the disease and what can be expected in the future. Support group

members state they wish to remain involved in decisions related to their life, for as long as possible. Having the opportunity to make choices each day as to what to wear and what to eat allows for self-expression and independence. However, support group members have also commented that they sometimes need to have stimulation limited. Too many choices can become confusing; they suggest offering choices, but limiting them to two or three such as "do you want to have spaghetti, tacos, or chili?"

Keeping socially connected helps to keep and build positive relationships. It also goes hand-in-hand with keeping the mind and body active. Support groups and other adult day care services can help foster friendships and reduce isolation (see related article on page 2). Learning together about Alzheimer's disease in a group that is non-judgmental, respectful, supportive, and safe builds strong, positive relationships.

CoffeeHouse members often bring articles on Alzheimer's disease to discuss during meetings. They wish to contribute in a meaningful way by educating others about their experiences with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia. The group has developed "Communication Tips" (see page 2) for caregivers and professionals to keep in mind when talking with a person who has Alzheimer's or related dementia.

It is very important for many people experiencing early stage memory loss to remain actively involved in advocating for themselves and for those who may be diagnosed with Alzheimer's in the future. As one support group member stated, *"It makes me feel good to contribute; I feel better when I can keep moving forward."*

Resources

"If You Have Alzheimer's Disease" Alzheimer's Association, 1998

"Is it Alzheimer's? Warning Signs You Should Know" Alzheimer's Association, 1996

"Living with Early Onset Alzheimer's Disease" Alzheimer's Association, 1999

"Alzheimer's: The Answers You Need" Davies and Jensen, Elder Books, 1998, \$12

"My Journey Into Alzheimer's Disease" Robert Davis, Tyndale House Publishers, 1989, \$10

"Alzheimer's Early Stages" Kuhn, 1998, \$15

"Just for You: For People Diagnosed With Alzheimer's Disease," Alzheimer's Society of Canada, \$4

To obtain these and other resources, contact the chapter office at (800) 337-3827 or visit our website at www.walzmigreatlakes.org.