

Memory Loss and Confusion

In the later stages of the disease, a person with Alzheimer's may not remember familiar people, places or things. Situations involving memory loss and confusion are extremely difficult for caregivers and families, and require much patience and understanding.

[What to expect](#)

[Causes](#)

[How to respond](#)

What to expect

In the earlier stages, memory loss and confusion may be mild. The person with dementia may be aware of — and frustrated by — the changes taking place, such as difficulty recalling recent events, making decisions or processing what was said by others.

In the later stages, memory loss becomes far more severe. A person may not recognize family members, may forget relationships, call family members by other names, or become confused about the location of home or the passage of time. He or she may forget the purpose of common items, such as a pen or a fork. These changes are some of the most painful for caregivers and families.

Such types of behavior is sometimes incorrectly referred to as "senility" or "senile dementia," which reflects the formerly widespread but incorrect belief that serious mental decline is a normal part of aging.

Learn more: [Stages of Alzheimer's](#), [Age-related Memory Loss vs. Alzheimer's](#), [Dealing with Memory Changes](#)

Causes

The main underlying cause of memory loss and confusion is the progressive damage to brain cells caused by Alzheimer's disease. While current medications cannot stop the damage Alzheimer's causes to brain cells, they may help lessen symptoms for a limited time.

Certain situations — such as a change in living arrangements, switch in routine or certain infections — can cause symptoms to worsen. Any time there is a sudden change in behavior, it is important to have a medical evaluation to rule out other causes.

How to respond

- **Stay calm.** Although being called by a different name or not being recognized can be painful, try not to make your hurt apparent.
- **Respond with a brief explanation.** Don't overwhelm the person with lengthy statements or reasons. Instead, clarify with a simple explanation.
- **Show photos and other reminders.** Use photographs and other thought-provoking items to remind the person of important relationships and places.
- **Travel with the person to where he or she is in time.** If the person's memory is focused on a particular time in his or her life, engage in conversation about recollections with an understanding that this is his or her current reality.
- **Offer corrections as suggestions.** Avoid explanations that sound like scolding. Try: "I thought it was a fork" or "I think she is your granddaughter Julie."
- **Try not to take it personally.** Alzheimer's disease causes your loved one to

forget, but your support and understanding will continue to be appreciated.

- **Share your experience with others.** Join [ALZConnected](#), our online support community and message boards, and share what response strategies have worked for you and get more ideas from other caregivers.