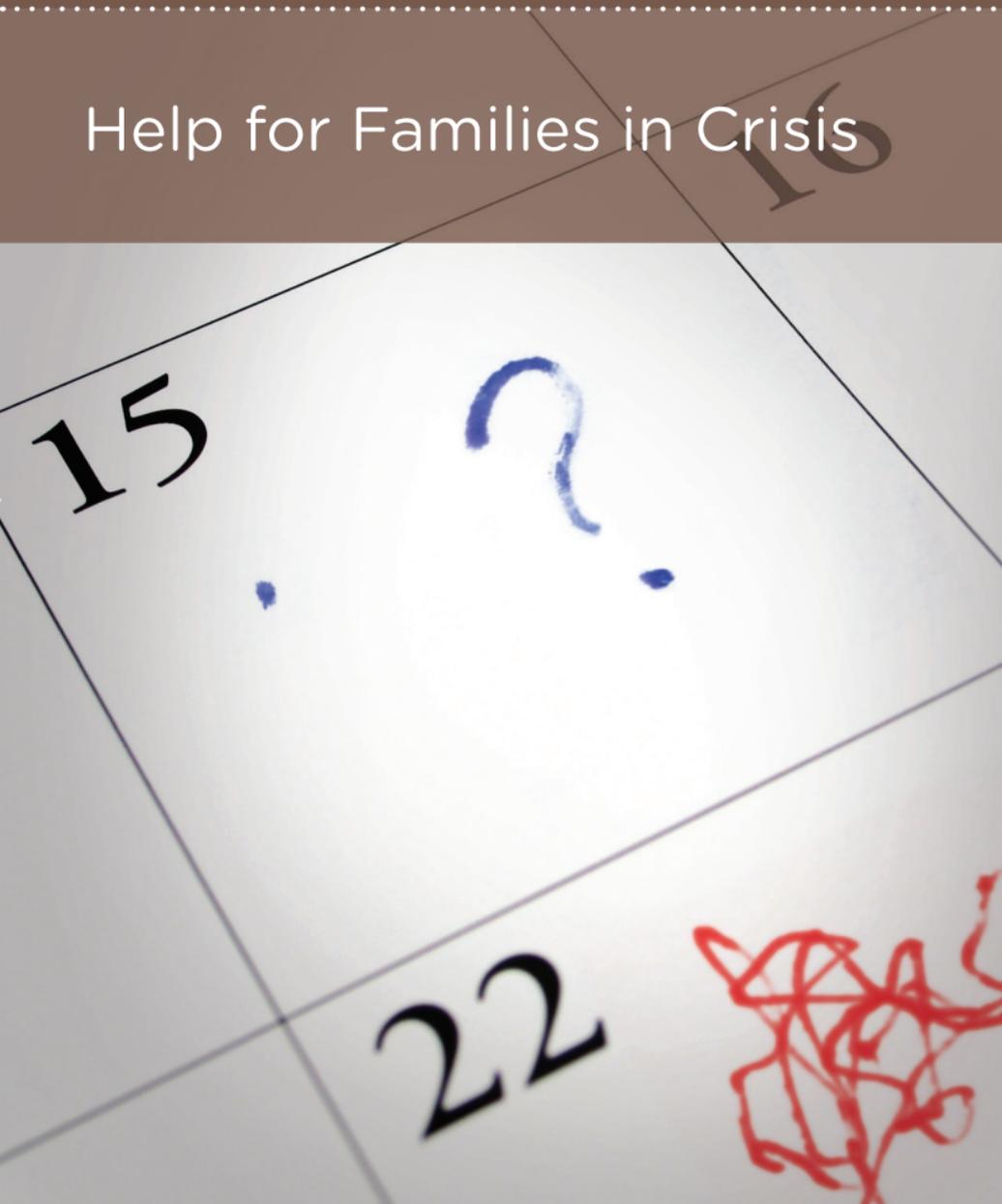


Alzheimer's Disease

Help for Families in Crisis



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“Grandpa, you put your car keys in the refrigerator.”

What might have been a humorous mistake was unsettling to Joe’s thirty-year-old grandson and to others in the Evans family. It was among a list of symptoms they had seen displayed in the family patriarch. Grandpa had lost his glasses, and the family found them on top of his study bookcase. At times he didn’t seem to recognize where he was. The elderly gentleman was a seventy-five-year-old retired math teacher who had been active all his life, and even in retirement continued to enjoy golfing. The family wondered if there was a problem bigger than simple forgetfulness or absentmindedness after he had a series of events including turning the wrong way on his trip home from the golf course, failing to mail the letters lying on the front seat of his car, and not remembering the name of a close friend. Also disconcerting was that their usually kind, godly grandparent seemed to be more easily irritated than usual.

The refrigerator incident motivated them to seek medical attention, so they took him to their family doctor for a thorough physical exam. The absence of any potential treatable causes for memory problems—such as low thyroid hormone, vitamin B12 deficiency, brain tumor, stroke, or blood clots in the brain—was helpful but disappointing news. It was helpful to know he did not have any of those conditions, but it was disappointing to learn there was no treatment to reverse the condition. Though there was no specific test to confirm the disease, the doctor believed Joe was experiencing the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease (AD).

If you have a loved one who has been diagnosed with AD, the above scenario may be all too familiar to you, even if the details are different. You are facing a multitude of questions regarding treatment and short- and long-term care options, as well as how you'll be able to handle the changes coming your way. Be reassured that God's grace will help you with each new stage you encounter.

As a family member and/or someone planning to help care for someone with Alzheimer's disease, you are also facing significant and life-altering challenges. Through all of the changes and challenges, remember that both you and your loved one have a Savior who knows what it's like to suffer and who offers his strength and his resources. Turn to him for the comfort Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 1:3–4: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (NIV). Trust the God of comfort and wisdom to guide you in providing care for your loved one. Even though you do not know the specific problems the disease will produce, depend on God's Word and wisdom to guide you as you walk this path with them.

The Early Stages

Early on you will face the difficulty that there is no known cure or treatment for Alzheimer's disease—nothing will reverse or slow down the progression of your loved one's condition. As you learn about the

disease affecting your loved one, you will find out that the brain is going through progressive, irreversible damage at the cellular level, which will affect memory, thinking, and learning skills, and is responsible for the mild memory problems you've probably already noticed. You'll also find that "as Alzheimer's advances through the brain, it leads to increasingly severe symptoms, including disorientation, mood and behavior changes; deepening confusion about events, time, and place; unfounded suspicions about family, friends, and professional caregivers; more serious memory loss and behavior changes; and difficulty speaking, swallowing, and walking."¹ While it is painful to think about your loved one going through these things, understanding the effects of the disease will help you think through potential problems and recognize that declining memory and ability to think and reason clearly, along with impaired judgment, will require the wisdom and grace of God to navigate. It is important to understand that there will come a time when your loved one will be unable to accomplish even simple tasks required for daily living, and it is helpful to begin preparing for this.

Even as you begin to wrestle with the reality of how this disease progresses, it is important to note that there are things you can do to help keep your loved one from deteriorating too rapidly. In the early stages of Alzheimer's, the person should "stay as engaged and active as possible for as long as possible."² One way to help loved ones with Alzheimer's stay engaged is to schedule family members and friends to spend time with them doing the activities they enjoy. For example,

if someone has enjoyed checkers and dominos, play those games together. Even if the person is not able to plan and think through plays as in former years, he or she can still enjoy the game. Try to choose games or activities that require less short-term memory. You can also encourage and even join your loved one in appropriate levels of exercise, which is helpful to both the body and mind. Encourage their friends to join in these activities to help keep them engaged, active, and socially connected. These kinds of activities allow everyone who cares for them to enjoy time together.

The Middle Stages

As the disease progresses, your loved one will begin to experience decreased functioning in several ways. Each one will have its own challenges—both for you and for them. Recognizing how AD is affecting your loved one is an important part of being able to support and care for them.

Decreased reasoning and judgment. Current memory is important in reasoning and judgment, so increasing memory loss makes it difficult to properly evaluate potential actions, which in turn leads to potentially harmful decisions. This inability can make it difficult to convince your loved one of the need for protective measures to keep them safe. Memory failures can also cause patients to “ignore” instructions from caregivers. While these situations can be frustrating or even scary for you as a caregiver, you must keep in mind that the person is not necessarily being stubborn, but instead has simply

lost the brain tissue needed to retain the information. This means you may need to redo many things for them. For example, a person who likes to take spring water to the bathroom at bedtime may forget there is a bottle already there. Rather than scold the person, simply leave it or quietly return it. In other words, recognize the general habits of the person and do what you can to follow those as unobtrusively as possible.

This can be very frustrating, and at times you will certainly feel overwhelmed and discouraged. Remind yourself that even as you are caring for someone with AD, God cares about your situation and is caring for you (1 Peter 5:7). Use your caregiving as a way to remember all the provisions God makes for you daily without your recognizing his help. In caring for your loved one and helping to provide for their needs, you are demonstrating the character and care of Christ toward them. This is a major way that he is building his character in you, and he will provide the resources of love and renewed energy to continue caring for your loved one. Share your struggles and frustrations with your heavenly Father and ask him to renew your strength (Isaiah 40:31). Ask for his wisdom and grace and for open hearts when you must have difficult conversations with your loved one, especially if you need to impose restrictions (e.g., not allowing them to drive). He *will* be faithful to both of you. And when you are tempted to complain and grow weary (as everyone who cares for someone with AD will be at some point), ask Jesus to remind you that as you serve one of “the least of these” you are really serving Jesus (Matthew 25:40).