Dementia & Depression: What’s the difference?

Kesstan Blandin, PhD
Dartmouth Centers for Health & Aging
Lebanon NH
Kesstan.blandin@dartmouth.edu
Learning Objectives

After the program, participants will be able to:

1. Differentiate the cognitive symptoms of dementia and depression.
2. Describe emotional distinctions between dementia and depression.
3. Explain the impact of dementia and depression in the older adult populations and why a diagnosis is important.
• Abnormal changes in a person’s behavior and thinking are often indicative of physiological changes taking place inside the brain.
• Different underlying processes and causes in the brain can have the same expression in behavior, thinking, and feeling.
• Elderly populations are more vulnerable to both dementia and depression.
• Recognizing a symptom is not a diagnosis, but indicates seeking a diagnosis is next.
Definition: A set of symptoms indicating progressive cognitive decline. Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is the most commonly diagnosed form of dementia (60-80%). Vascular dementia, Frontotemporal, Lewy Body and Parkinson’s are other dementias.

Causes: Physiological processes that kill brain cells; progressive, no way to cure, stop, or delay dementia.

Onset & Prevalence: Slow, insidious onset of months to years. 95% of all cases of AD are in population 65+. 13% (1 in 8) of 65+ have AD or 5.4 million Americans
Dementia

Signs and Symptoms:

• Short-term Memory Loss
• Disorientation/Confusion
• New challenges in planning or solving problems
• Difficulty completing familiar tasks
• Misplacing things, unable to trace steps
• Poor judgment (social situations, weather)
• Withdrawal from work or social activities
• Changes in mood or personality (depression, apathy, disinhibition)
**Depression**

**Definition:** A change in mood lasting at least 2 weeks that includes sadness, negative outlook, loss of interest in activities/others, lack of pleasure, decline in function.

**Causes:** Both physiological, brain-based processes and life situations can bring on depression. Poor health can be a factor in the elderly especially.

**Onset & Prevalence:** Recent, unexplained changes in mood lasting at least 2 weeks.

Depression is under-reported in elderly populations

65+: 12% of population but represent 16% of suicides
Depression

Causes in the Elderly:

**Health problems** – Illness and disability; chronic or severe pain; cognitive decline; damage to body image due to surgery or disease.

**Loneliness and isolation** – Living alone; a dwindling social circle due to deaths or relocation; decreased mobility due to illness or loss of driving privileges.

**Reduced sense of purpose** – Feelings of purposelessness or loss of identity due to retirement or physical limitations on activities.

**Fears** – Fear of death or dying; anxiety over financial problems or health issues.

**Recent bereavement** – The death of friends, family members, and pets; the loss of a spouse or partner.
Depression

Signs and Symptoms:
• Irritability
• Sadness
• Memory loss
• Withdrawal
• Vague complaints of pain or health
• Sleep disruption
• Loss of appetite, pleasure, weight
Is it Depression or Dementia?

### Symptoms of Depression
- Mental decline is relatively rapid
- Knows the correct time, date, and where he or she is
- Difficulty concentrating
- Language and motor skills are slow, but normal
- Notices or worries about memory

### Symptoms of Dementia
- Mental decline happens slowly
- Confused and disoriented to time and place
- Difficulty w/ short-term memory
- Writing, speaking, and motor skills are impaired
- Doesn’t notice memory problems or seem to care
Why Is Diagnosis Important?

- Though irreversible, the symptoms of dementia can be diminished and the quality of life for patient and family increased through education of coping skills and resources.

- Untreated depression can have a negative impact on mental and physical health, including suicide but also making other health issues worse.
Cognitive Distinctions

• Dementia involves deficits in thinking processes – cannot remember or understand, cannot recall words or figure things out, will often lack insight into deficits

• Depression is a restriction in thinking; it limits the sphere or range through a negative cognitive filter. Memory problems, not enough energy to focus or figure things out due to hopelessness.
Emotional Distinctions

• Dementia is characterized by a progressive change in emotional expression that is unlike the person. E.g., developing disinhibited emotional expression, paranoia, sadness, fear, or other emotions that are unusual for the person and they can no longer inhibit or regulate.

• Depression is characterized by being stuck in negative emotions, especially irritability for elder persons, sadness, hopelessness.
Shared Symptoms & Co-morbidity

• Strong negative emotion
• Acting “unlike themselves”
• Disrupted sleep cycles
• Depression and apathy are the two most common neuropsychiatric symptoms of dementia
• Depression can be an early sign of dementia and dementia can be an underlying cause of depression
• Each can be misdiagnosed as the other in various situations
Treatment

• Dementia is irreversible but can be treated to ease symptoms and support higher functioning

• Depression can be reversed and/or treated, even if dementia is an underlying cause

• Investigate and rule out each condition. Presence of one condition may not be the cause of all symptoms.

• The most important thing a caregiver can do is to be emotionally calm, supportive, and get treatment for the individual.
Life-style strategies for Prevention

- Regular exercise
- Heart healthy diet
- Supportive relationships
- Social and mental engagement
- Reduced stress
- Good sleep
- Purpose and meaning
- Time in nature
Who To Contact

If it’s dementia, contact the Alzheimer’s Association (800-272-3900) or www.alz.org

If it’s depression, contact NAMI (800-950-6264) or www.naminh.org