

# Memory Loss Can Be More Than Forgetfulness

“I’m worried about Mom; she seems to be forgetting appointments.”

“Sometimes I discover a stack of overdue bills that Dad hasn’t paid.”

“My boss told me last week that I’m missing too many deadlines.”

“I used to enjoy reading novels, but now I’m having difficulty following the plot!”

Perhaps you or a family member can relate to one of these memory-loss circumstances.

Yes, each of us misplaces a set of keys now and then. And we sometimes can’t put a name with a face. We nervously laugh off these occasional blips. But if your ability to manage work and daily activities is suffering, you might want to rethink that response. According to Barb Brandt, LCPC, program manager for the Mind Matters program at North Shore Senior Center, there are common symptoms of memory loss that are different from the normal memory changes associated with aging:

- Having difficulty with work or other familiar tasks.
- Often struggling to find words for common items or express a thought.
- Becoming more easily frustrated.
- Getting lost when driving to familiar places or finding unexplained dents on your car.

Mind Matters helps to address the cognitive challenges—difficulties with thinking, learning, understanding, and remembering—that disrupt a person’s daily routine at home and/or at work. A variety of therapeutic activities used in the program support the social, educational, and emotional needs of Mind Matters participants, who are coping with early memory loss.

Pat Donahoe noticed unusual changes in her rapid recall and sought help from her physician, who is a geriatrician—a specialist in older adult health. After assessments and tests, Pat was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and immediately was put on medications that she believes have helped slow down the deterioration of her memory. “Also,” said Pat, “I wanted to do whatever else I could to control or retard the process of the disease.” Both Pat and her partner, Ellie Davis, are educators (retired high school teachers), lifelong learners (advanced degrees galore), and problem-solvers. So when they learned of the Mind Matters program, they began the admission process.

*“With each potential participant and family member, I do a phone interview to get a sense whether Mind Matters will be a good fit. Then we get together for an application interview so I can learn more about the individual’s medical and social history. I also complete two short screenings that measure the ability to do cognitive exercises like the ones we do in the group. I want to be sure the person is likely to benefit from the program. The individual also must be aware of the memory loss and willing to talk about it.”—Barb*

Socialization, diet, exercise, mindfulness, spirituality, and keeping mentally active are documented benefits for people with early memory loss. Barb and her Mind Matters colleagues use a variety of research-based strategies in their “use it or lose it” approach. The program includes:

- Cognitive exercises such as brain fitness activities, life narrative, relaxation, and reminiscence.
- Check-in and support group discussions on topics such as nutrition, stress management, coping strategies, spirituality, changes in roles, and future planning.
- Physical exercise—walks, dance therapy, tai chi, and yoga.

Creative arts therapies are a unique feature of Mind Matters. They help to promote wellness and a sense of well-being for participants by stimulating and strengthening body, mind, and spirit. Therapists in art, music, and dance/movement integrate creative activities into the Mind Matters program and use them as the basis for therapeutic discussions with participants.

Barb also encourages a healthy lifestyle, adopting the mantra, “What’s good for your heart health is good for your brain health.”

Pat was thoughtful and articulate as she described Mind Matters: “The group includes people of different ages [currently, 58 - 87 years old], men and women, differing backgrounds—all facing a common issue. We’re each on a journey, though at different points on that journey. In the group, there’s kindness as well as non-verbal and verbal rapport.”

Pat notices that at the end of the day, her mind is more flexible and retentive. Ellie agrees, and commented, “Pat might be tired, but her mind is stimulated. When Pat is at Mind Matters, I can be confident that something productive is going on for her.”

Mind Matters also supports family members. Barb facilitates a monthly family support group and checks in quarterly with families about any concerns. Additionally, she holds a face-to-face meeting every six months to assess how the participant is doing, discuss any physical, cognitive, and medical changes, and review plans for the future. “It’s important to know what your next step will be before you need it,” said Barb. “For instance, we have had members in our group who lived on their own. As changes in functioning began to occur, more help was needed in the home or they needed to move to a more supportive environment.” Barb mentioned that when Mind Matters is no longer the best fit for a participant, a transition to the House of Welcome day program can be arranged.

Barb emphasized that diagnosing memory loss early is important. “Seeing a physician when symptoms appear can help rule out any reversible memory loss that might be caused by conditions such as infections, major depression, brain tumors, or metabolic disorders (vitamin deficiencies, kidney, or thyroid).” If it is a cognitive impairment, medication may be prescribed to help slow future memory loss. In addition, people diagnosed with early memory loss can be proactive in promoting brain health and helping to maintain cognitive abilities.

Early diagnosis and early intervention are the key ingredients in helping a person with early memory loss stay as independent as possible for as long as possible. In the words of one of the program participants: “If you’re wondering whether you have a memory problem, don’t wait! Get a diagnosis.” Pat concurs and added, “Go to a doctor to see what might be physical reasons. Then get into a program like Mind Matters.” ■



*Pat Donahoe, Mind Matters participant with Ellie Davis, her partner.*



North Shore Senior Center’s House of Welcome Adult Day Services has two highly regarded services for adults with memory loss: the House of Welcome day program and Mind Matters program for individuals with early memory loss.

From the moment in 1983 when the House of Welcome day program opened its doors, it has been a place for individuals with memory loss from Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias to feel valued and respected. The therapeutic programming provided by skilled professionals also is a boon to caregivers because they know their loved ones are participating in meaningful activities. The program is funded by philanthropic donations, in particular the annual benefit that draws hundreds of supporters.

Mind Matters programming was developed in 2008 to address the needs of adults in the early stage of memory loss. Created with a seed grant from the Brookdale Foundation, Mind Matters now is supported by the Martin and Mary L. Boyer Foundation. The program is the 2014 winner of the MetLife/American Society on Aging MindAlert Award, which recognizes innovative, research-based programming.

House of Welcome Adult Day Services hosts an open monthly support group for family members of persons with memory loss from Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias. Facilitated by Mary Lu Osterberg, LCPC, Clinical Manager, the group meets on the second Tuesday of every month from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. at North Shore Senior Center. There is no fee and registration is not required. Please come join us!

**If you want to learn more about House of Welcome Adult Day Services, including the day program, Mind Matters and family support, call 847.242.6250 or contact us via email at [HOW@nssc.org](mailto:HOW@nssc.org).** ■