

# The Peter Rabins Alzheimer's Family Support Center

*funded by the Jane Shapiro Family Education Program*  
at the Johns Hopkins Memory and Alzheimer's Treatment Center  
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## TIPS FOR FAMILY CAREGIVERS

### How Do You Know If You Have Alzheimer's Disease?

**Video Script** - to view video go to [www.hopkinsmedicine.org/rabins\\_alzheimers](http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/rabins_alzheimers)

**Rabins:** Dementia is not inevitable as we age. If you look at everybody over age 65, about 10% of people have some form of dementia. And while it becomes more common as we get older, even at age 90, 50-70% of people still have normally thinking cognition.

**Caregiver:** Well, it wasn't memory loss. And yet it was kind of memory loss. But it wasn't memory loss that the average person would consider to be memory loss. It was problem solving.

#### ► How to Look for Early Symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease

**Rabins:** There are some things that people shouldn't worry about; misplacing your glasses, your keys occasionally, having trouble coming out with a name even though you know that somebody's familiar. Those seem to be accompaniments of normal aging. In fact, usually you do remember that name. It just takes a lot longer. On the other hand, there are things that are concerning, and should make one look further. For example, if you're having trouble doing something that you've always done – driving somewhere familiar, doing your taxes, filling out a checkbook, cooking. Those are things you'd done without any trouble and now they're becoming harder. If you have a problem with any of these, then it's time to go to a professional and look into whether there might be something that can be fixed, or to at least get a proper diagnosis.

**Caregiver:** I knew that she was getting more forgetful. I didn't think too much about it. I just thought well you know--

**Rabins:** Yeah. You must have been concerned because you were calling her everyday.

**Caregiver:** Well I mean I was concerned. But maybe I was more concerned than I realized.

**Caregiver:** That she would seem to be having difficulty. And I thought, she just doesn't want to set the table, this isn't good, I have to push her. So I would push her and all of a sudden she broke down and just said, "I'm so sorry. I've just forgotten."

**Caregiver:** I took her to Florida and that was the first time that I had been with her on a continual basis, 24 hour basis. And I noticed like late in the afternoon, periods of confusion, "Where are we?" She thought she was back in Catonsville where she lived at and it happened every day we were there.

#### ► When to Get a Professional Evaluation

**Rabins:** There are some memory problems that also trigger concern. If you forgot an important event 10 minutes or 30 minutes after it happened, that's serious. If someone tells you that you asked the same question three or four times in an hour, that may well indicate that there some serious problem going on and you should have it professionally evaluated.

**Caregiver:** I had asked him why he seemed to be selling -- buying and selling so much of our stocks. What was he doing and he couldn't tell me. That was probably the one that made me know that we had a [problem].

**Caregiver:** I was keeping much more of a watchful eye on things that she was doing and I noticed she was starting to have problems with being able to write a check, just being able to understand bills. She was getting so she couldn't take care of her finances.

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**Caregiver:** And then very slowly what started to happen was if I was on the phone with her she would say-- she would turn around and ask my father, "Where do we go? What do we do?" And I thought that was very strange. So that was my first inclination that something was wrong.

**Rabins:** The majority of people with Alzheimer Disease never know that they have a problem. I actually believe that it's the disease itself that blocks awareness. But that presents a real challenge to the family and the caregiver because that often leaves the person to say things like, "Well I'm just like all my other friends who can't remember a name every once in a while." One of the things that I suggest that might get the person to the doctor is to say that "Well, I'll just feel better if you got it evaluated, and if I'm wrong, I'll be happy just as you are." That can sometimes help the sick person accept an assessment, even though they don't think they need it.

**Caregiver:** My family doctor did not tell me that until a couple of years later when Jim was really getting worse and I wanted him reevaluated. And he said, "What for?" I said, "So I know what I'm dealing with." Well, Jim and I were both relieved, because Jim felt like he was going crazy. He used to walk around the house like this, holding his head. "Something's going wrong up there. I don't know what's happening and I don't like it."

**Rabins:** So, getting the diagnosis actually made him feel a little better?

**Caregiver:** Yes, it did.

**Rabins:** I think it's important to have a thorough professional assessment whenever there is a question about somebody having a serious memory or cognitive problem. Sometimes you find out that there's not a problem and that can be reassuring. But even when you find out that there is an illness, it's important that a person be thoroughly evaluated to make sure that there's not a treatable disease or that there aren't medical or psychiatric problems contributing to the memory problems. And finally, even if the diagnosis is Alzheimer's disease, to find out in a positive way, what can be done to help the person live a better life, and help you as a caregiver do a better job in helping them care for themselves.

**Caregiver:** By this time, his memory was going. And he wanted me to go with him to the doctor's and actually sit in on what the doctor would tell him.

**Rabins:** It's important to realize that sometimes there are treatable medical or psychiatric problems that are inducing memory trouble and if those are fixed, the person can recover. But even if the diagnosis is Alzheimer's disease or some other cause of dementia, you can get information that can help things go much better. And from my point of view, that's one of the reasons, one of the important reasons to get a thorough assessment.