

Aid for dementia sufferers

ALZHEIMER'S DAY: THEME FOR THIS YEAR'S COMMEMORATION TODAY IS 'LET'S TALK ABOUT IT'

➤ **The misconception that very little can be done about it must be challenged.**

Adele May and Shakila Dada

The thought of having our memories erased and being unable to recognise the people we cherish would elicit fear in most individuals. For adults with a dementia diagnosis, this fear is magnified – even more so for those closest to them.

Dementia is one of the major causes of disability in older adults and is recognised as a public health priority by the World Health Organisation.

This month is dedicated to raising dementia awareness, and today is set aside to commemorate World Alzheimer's Day.

This year, its theme is: "Let's talk about it".

Nothing can prepare an individual or family for the impact of dementia. Although each person

with dementia is unique, most families share the common sentiment the condition is a heart-breaking experience, as one essentially grieves the loss of a loved one while they are alive.

About 50 million people are living with dementia worldwide.

A global dementia prevalence is forecasted to reach 75 million by 2030, and 131.5 million by 2050. About 66% of sufferers reside in low- and middle-income nations.

As a syndrome, dementia is the general label given to a cluster of irreversible changes in memory, communication, reasoning, executive functioning and attention. A key risk factor for developing the condition is advancement in age. For this reason, there is a widely misinformed view dementia is an inevitable outcome of old age.

This, however, is not the case. Dementia is the result of distinctive pathologies affecting different parts of the brain. This presents a wide range of symptoms which profile dementia into several subtypes (for example, vascular dementia arising from stroke or heart disease).

The most common being Alzheimer's dementia, which re-



PROFESSOR SHAKILA DADA.

sults from Alzheimer's disease.

Because it is a degenerative condition, one misconception is that very little can be done to improve the quality of life of those who suffer from it. This narrative paints a bleak future for people with dementia and is one which must be challenged.

Communication difficulties persist across all dementia subtypes. Depending on the subtype, dementia sufferers typically experience difficulty in understanding language or finding the right



ADELE MAY. Pictures: Supplied

word when describing events, retelling stories or sharing jokes.

They might also repeat questions that have been answered or confuse people's names.

Over time, with a loss of language, those with the condition are likely to withdraw from interpersonal interaction altogether. These communication difficulties can be distressing to spouses, children or grandchildren as they might be unaware of how to provide appropriate support when interacting with their loved one.

Ultimately, these challenges could create a social and emotional divide between those with dementia and their family.

There are strategies relatives can employ during to support someone with dementia:

- Use their name to address them. This not only shows respect but also upholds their self-identity and personhood;
- Use multiple forms of communication (spoken language with facial expressions);
- Avoid completing their sentences; rather wait for them to respond at their own pace.

There are many organisations, such as Dementia Alliance International (dementiaallianceinternational.org), leading the charge in advocating for people with dementia to express their opinions in matters affecting their lives.

Dementia SA (dementiasa.org) and Alzheimer's SA (alzheimers.org.za) are examples of nonprofit organisations offering workshops, training and advice.

► Adele May is a PhD candidate at the University of Pretoria (UP)

► Professor Shakila Dada is from UP's Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication.



This article is copyright protected and licensed under agreement with DALRO. Redistribution, modification, re-sale of this is not allowed without prior written consent of the original author of the works.

