



## Denial and the Dementia Diagnosis

### What It Means to Deny a Dementia Diagnosis

Denial is a natural psychological response to a stressful situation ~ a coping mechanism we use to manage our anxiety when we feel overwhelmed. Research tells us that persons with dementia and their care partners often experience denial after receiving a dementia diagnosis. The news can feel heavy, overwhelming and unbelievable. As an initial response, diagnosis denial may provide much-needed therapeutic space, allowing time for everyone involved to catch their breath and process what to do next. Several factors contribute to this initial denial.

#### ***For the person with memory loss, denial may be attributed to:***

- ~ their waning cognitive skills and lack of insight, limiting their ability to recognize changes in their own behavior, memory or personality.
- ~ their inability to remember the medical consultation discussing a dementia diagnosis.
- ~ stigma associated with memory loss and a fear of negative responses from others.
- ~ an awareness about the diagnosis followed by a fear response, which can look like denial.

#### ***As a result, they may:***

- ~ refuse help.
- ~ refuse to take medications.
- ~ engage in risky behaviors like driving, wandering, using tools that can harm.
- ~ refuse to visit the physician for follow-up care.
- ~ feel overwhelmed and stressed, resulting in behavior changes.

#### ***For the care partner, denial may be attributed to:***

- ~ their desire for it to just go away.
- ~ their inability to accept changes in a person they heavily rely upon.
- ~ wondering whether it could be depression or anything other than dementia. The diagnosis can be hard to believe and accept.
- ~ a general uneasiness to face the uncertainty of dementia and mortality.

#### ***As a result, the care partner may:***

- ~ miss essential opportunities for support.
- ~ miss opportunities to keep the person with memory loss safe.
- ~ face legal and financial complications.
- ~ create family conflict.
- ~ neglect their own health.
- ~ see an increase in overwhelm, stress, frustration, fear, anger, and hopelessness.



### ***How the Care Partner Can Address Denial***

Dementia is a diagnosis no one wants to have or to manage. For care partners and family members, it is a reality that ultimately needs to be addressed. If left unchecked, dementia denial can quickly move from therapeutic to harmful.

- ~ Understand and recognize that denial is a common occurrence.
- ~ Recognize that the person with memory loss may not fully understand and accept the diagnosis. They may not have the cognitive skills to process this information in a meaningful way, and trying to accept it may create even more confusion and stress.
- ~ Learn the value of the “therapeutic lie”.
- ~ Remain calm and resist challenging the person with memory loss. They are losing their ability to see and understand what is happening.
- ~ Keep a journal of what you observe. The act of writing down your thoughts and feelings can provide an outlet for you to process what you experience.
- ~ Speak with the physician and other professionals so that you are well informed. Knowledge is power.
- ~ Ask for help and learn to accept help.