



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.