

Not Afraid to Face Alzheimer's Disease



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By Pamela B. Smith, Director, Aging & Independence Services

Don't be afraid," says John Bodie, 74. "Don't be afraid of Alzheimer's."

That's how John started out his discussion of this disease as a member of a Town Hall panel at the University of San Diego earlier this year. In the audience was a physician also suffering from early Alzheimer's who expressed his frustrations about no longer being

able to drive. Although John can still drive, he knows about the frustrations of this illness.

"The hardest part is giving up things you can't do anymore. You give up some of your independence because you have to depend on someone else." He knows that his freedom behind the wheel will be gone one day soon. That makes him angry sometimes.

What John really meant to say was "don't deny it." Don't deny you have symptoms. Get tested. Don't deny the illness if you receive that diagnosis. Learn to work with it.

John was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease nearly two years ago, but he showed symptoms much earlier, according to his wife of 26 years, Joan.

"His inability to follow up on things was getting more regular," she says. "Instead of once a week, it was every day." And he would forget he already asked a question and repeat it. He started to forget a lot of recent events and activities, but not past experiences.

Since being diagnosed, John's decline has been slowed through medica-



JOAN AND JOHN BODIE 2010

tions. And he works harder at staying connected with others, staying stimulated mentally. His personal mission is to help others learn what he and Joan are going through and to face whatever comes.

John was recently invited to join the 2010 Alzheimer's Association National Early-Stage Advisory Group. As an advisor, he met with other Early-Stage advisors in Chicago recently. This advisory group was developed four years ago to involve people with Alzheimer's disease in creating more awareness of the early stages of this disease, to increase treatment and program options and to reduce the stigma that surrounds Alzheimer's.

In casual conversations, most people can't tell John has any cognitive challenges. He continues to take long walks around his mobile home park and chat with neighbors.

"Joan gave me a cellphone so if I'm gone too long, it goes 'buzz,'" he says smiling.

John was encouraged by one of these friends to join

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the Senior Volunteer Patrol with the local Sheriff's department. He went through training and studied, but couldn't pass the test to qualify. He couldn't memorize the many call numbers. For a man who spent 43 years as a heavy equipment operator knowing the ins and outs of all kinds of different machinery, it was hard for him to admit that his mind could no longer hold onto such detail. But John is a realist. He didn't want to be a detriment while on patrol.

The hardest part was convincing his neighbor that he couldn't tackle this volunteer role, Joan says. "Our neighbor kept saying, 'He's fine.' I said to him, 'Yes, he is fine, but he has memory problems.'"

To help them adjust to the changes in their lives that this disease is causing, both John and Joan attend separate support groups through the Alzheimer's Association.

"It's almost like a club," says John of his group. "But it's a crutch; that's what it is. You talk about problems and ways to solve them. You get to understand that you're not the only one. You see someone worse and you try to help. One man has trouble talking but by the end of our hour, he starts speaking again."

Joan values the exchange of ideas in her monthly caregiver

support group in Alpine. She calls the facilitator "a problem-solver," and says this group is a must for her; "like an AA meeting, you have to go."

Joan also learned to take care of herself after about with breast cancer in 2007. "It makes you pay attention," she says. Now she makes sure she does things for herself, such as line dancing, belonging to the Alpine Women's Club and water exercises at the Women's Fitness Center in El Cajon.

What this twosome knows to expect is more change as a result of this progressive disease.



"It's a fact of our life," says Joan. "You have to go with the flow. You adjust your lifestyle."

She says John still loves to read, but a regular novel is too much, so she buys Reader's Digest condensed books, which he can still absorb.

"And we don't do five or six different things in a day. That can be tiring

and confusing. Crowds can be problematic, too. We just don't try some of the things we did before, like flying alone."

But they still enjoy many things together. A special treat is attending free concerts and musicals at various East County venues, since John used to sing and was active with barbershop quartets for 25 years.

"She's my guardian angel," John says of Joan. "I wouldn't want to try living alone. I could probably muddle through, but it would be difficult. Any man who has Alzheimer's disease should have someone like her. She's my life line

Why is early diagnosis important?

An early, accurate diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease helps patients and their families plan for the future. It gives them time to discuss care options while the patient can still take part in making decisions. Early diagnosis also offers the best chance to treat the symptoms of the disease.

The Symptoms

Alzheimer's disease begins slowly. At first, the only symptom may be mild forgetfulness, which can be confused with age-related memory change. Most people with mild forgetfulness do not have Alzheimer's disease. In the early stage of Alzheimer's disease, people may have trouble remembering recent events, activities, or the names of familiar people or things. They may not be able to solve simple math problems. Such difficulties may be a bother, but usually they are not serious enough to cause alarm.

The Warning Signs

Memory loss that disrupts daily life is not part of aging. It may be a warning sign of Alzheimer's disease, a brain disease that causes a slow decline in memory, thinking and reasoning skills. If you notice any of the problems below, please see a doctor.

- 1 • Repeating the same story-word for word, or asking the same question over and over.
- 2 • Forgetting activities that were previously done with ease and regularity. Things like how to cook, make repairs, or play cards.
- 3 • Losing one's ability to plan, solve problems or to work with numbers.
- 4 • For some people, having vision problems is a sign of Alzheimer's.
- 5 • Getting lost in familiar surroundings, or misplacing household objects.
- 6 • May have trouble following or joining a conversation, and may

avoid being social because of the changes they have experienced.

7 • Neglecting to bathe, or wearing the same clothes over and over again, while insisting that they have taken a bath or that their clothes are still clean.

8 • Mood and personalities of people with Alzheimer's can change. They can become confused, suspicious, depressed, fearful or anxious.

9 • People with Alzheimer's may experience changes in judgment or decision-making.

As the disease goes on, symptoms are more easily noticed and become serious enough to cause people with Alzheimer's disease or their family members to seek medical help. Forgetfulness begins to interfere with daily activities. People in the middle stages of Alzheimer's disease may forget how to do simple tasks like brushing their teeth or combing their hair. They can no longer think clearly. They can fail to recognize familiar people and places. They begin to have problems speaking, understanding, reading, or writing. Later on, people with Alzheimer's disease may become anxious or aggressive, or wander away from home. Eventually, patients need total care.

Help is available

The Alzheimer's Association.

Call the toll free 1800 272 3900 Nationwide Call Center for information, assistance, care consultation and referrals 24 hours a day, seven days a week, or the San Diego's local chapter at **(858) 492-4400**, or visit www.alz.org.

County of San Diego Aging and Independence Services Health and Human Services Agency providing support for seniors and the disabled, help family members and others who provide care for a loved one, and investigate reports of elder and dependent abuse.

1800 510 2020

Eldercare Locator A free national service of the Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

1-800-677-1116

(6 a.m.-5 p.m. PST)

CAREGIVING • DAYCARE

Glenner Alzheimer's Family

Centers 1 800 736 6674

Southern Caregiver Resource

Center 1800 827 1008

Elderhelp of San Diego

619-284-9281

San Ysidro Adult Day Healthcare Center

619- 205-1373

OTHER RESOURCES

Social Security

800-772-1213

Medicare 800-633-4227

Access to Independence

619-293-3500

Legal- Elderlaw & Advocacy
858-565-1392

Food -Catholic Charities
619-426-2877 x 11

Food -Jewish Family Services
619-229-2390

Hosing- Tenants Legal Center
858-571-7100

Hosing- San Diego Housing
Commission 619-231-8833

For additional information: 211