

Marin Independent Journal

Monday, November 15, 2021

Marin Voice

Holidays are a good time to watch for cognitive decline

By Anne Grey

November is the start of the holiday season and it is also Alzheimer's Awareness Month. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. Because it is a progressive disease and the decline is gradual, it is very easy to miss the early warning signs.

Prior to becoming CEO at Vivalon (formerly known as Whistlestop), I worked for the Alzheimer's Association. The most common thing I heard from families whose loved ones were impacted by Alzheimer's disease and all dementias was, "I wish we had known sooner." That is why I am passionate about sharing signs to look for in loved ones and friends during this holiday season — especially after spending so much time apart.

Social gatherings during the holidays are "prime time" opportunities to take serious notice of early signs of memory impairment, which are not part of the normal aging process.

Signs to watch for include dressing inappropriately, lapses in hygiene, forgetting words and replacing them with something like calling a television a "movie box," or a loved one accusing someone of stealing property (which they misplaced and could not retrace their steps to find.) A change in mood or behavior is another red flag. So is difficulty completing familiar tasks. If mom forgets her secret gravy recipe after decades of family Thanksgivings, take notice.

When you see signs like these, which are not normal aging, it is important to consult a doctor to get proper treatment and support. Early diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or other disorders causing dementia is important so people receive appropriate early intervention, care and support services. It also allows for the person with dementia to share their wishes for care in the future.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, there is growing evidence indicating that people can reduce risks of cognitive decline by adopting key lifestyle

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habits. Check out the 10 Ways to Love Your Brain section on the association's website.

Those healthy brain habits include regular cardiovascular exercise, challenging the brain by learning something new or taking on a hobby, maintaining good heart health, quitting smoking, supporting a healthy diet, preventing brain injuries, sleeping well and maintaining good overall mental health.

In addition, new studies indicate that maintaining strong social relationships and keeping mentally active as we age can lower the risk of Alzheimer's disease because it helps strengthen connections between the nerve cells and the brain. While research is not conclusive — partially due to the need for more large-scale studies in diverse populations

— it seems clear that adopting healthy lifestyle choices, in addition to staying socially active and engaged, can significantly help support and improve brain health.

Vivalon recently launched a 6-week healthy aging program, Vitality@Vivalon, which takes participants through several health modules, with an interactive curriculum and scheduled follow-ups to monitor and improve each individual's healthy aging scorecard. I invite and encourage community members of all ages to join us for the next Vitality@Vivalon program in January, because brain health and healthy aging begin at every age.

People are living longer and want to be active participants in their individual healthy aging paths. Vivalon's various pro-

grams, activities, classes, workshops, events and volunteer opportunities all help to keep older adults active and socially and mentally engaged, which we now know can improve brain health in addition to myriad other positive health outcomes.

While some people stay engaged by taking a class to learn something new at our Healthy Aging Center, others choose to try a new movement program such as tai chi or yoga, and still others prefer the social engagement and sense of fulfillment that comes from volunteering and giving back.

During November and throughout the year, let's work together to spread awareness, help each other make good health and lifestyle decisions, and know the signs of Alzheimer's disease that should not be ignored so people can receive an early and accurate diagnosis and the care they need.

Anne Grey is a resident of Larkspur and serves as CEO at Vivalon, formerly known as Whistlestop.