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Dispelling myths, raising awareness about dementia

By Anne Grey

June is Alzheimer's and Brain Awareness Month, so let's talk a little bit about the fact and fiction surrounding Alzheimer's, other dementias and brain health.

Historians can trace the occurrence of dementia all the way back to 2000 B.C. when ancient Egyptians were aware of the fact that memory declines as people grow old. At around 600 A.D., historians find the first use of the word "dementia" when Saint Isidore, archbishop of Seville, used it in his book "Etymologies."

The word is of Latin origin: "de" meaning loss or deprivation, "ment" meaning mind, and "ia" indicating a state. So, "dementia" means "loss of the state of the mind."

If you have ever known someone affected by Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia, then you know how difficult and isolating the disease is for everyone involved. My grandfather died from Alzheimer's disease, and memory loss is only one of the devastating consequences. Others include disorientation, confusion, behavior changes and, eventually, difficulty speaking, swallowing and breathing. There is no cure.

Today in California, 690,000 people live with Alzheimer's and this number is projected to increase by 21.7% in the next three years to 840,000. One in three older adults die with some form of dementia, and related deaths have increased 17% during the pandemic.

While these numbers are frightening, there is good news too. First, I'd like to dispel the biggest cultural myth that Alzheimer's is a normal part of aging. It is not.

Prior to becoming CEO at Vivalon, I served as executive director for Alzheimer's Association, Orange County, and I can confidently share that the research leaves no grey area — Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia are not a normal part of aging.

What can we do to improve our brain health and decrease our risk of Alzheimer's and other dementias? Current research supported by the Alzheimer's Association shows that staying mentally, physically and socially active, while eating a healthy diet, can help reduce risk factors that affect our brain health.

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Earlier this month, Vivalon celebrated a milestone that was more than 10 years in the making when we broke ground on our Healthy Aging Campus, a new, modern model of care, where the housing, medical and social needs of our older adult community will be met all in one place.

I've been reflecting that everything we will do at our new Healthy Aging Campus helps prevent the onset of cognitive decline. Fitness, mindfulness, lifelong learning classes, nutritious meals, onsite medical care, art classes, community events and lectures — most importantly, it provides a friendly setting where people can find opportunities for connection and engagement. These are all activities proven to reduce the risk of dementia, and I cannot wait to open the doors to this new community hub in late 2023.

Alzheimer's and Brain Awareness Month is a way to propel research and find a cure for Alzheimer's disease, understand early warning signs of dementia, and engage in brain healthy activities like those we offer at Vivalon. Here are two simple ways you can take action:

- Register for our healthy aging series called "Vitality@Vivalon," an eight-week healthy aging program designed to give participants a baseline assessment of their current health, then provide information, tools and support to encourage a shift toward new habits that can improve overall health and promote healthy aging. Call 415-456-9062 to register.
- Visit alz.org/10signs to educate yourself on the 10 most common warning signs of Alzheimer's disease and learn why early diagnosis is important.

Do not be slow to act if you have concerns about your memory. Early diagnosis allows access to early interventions to reduce anxiety, economic risk and depression as well as gain information and tools to aid in planning for the future. Learn more at alz.org or, call the 24/7 help line at 800-272-3900.

When my grandfather was experiencing challenges, I wish I knew what I know now because his journey would have been filled with more dignity and peace had we been able to get an earlier diagnosis.

Anne Grey, of Larkspur, is CEO of Vivalon (formerly Whistlestop).