

# Conversations Around Brain Health: Reframing Expectations for Healthcare Providers, Patients, and Caregivers



By now, you have seen how you can help patients prevent or delay cognitive decline and dementia by discussing brain health and addressing modifiable risk factors. You can also diagnose Alzheimer's disease earlier, which benefits both patients and caregivers. We know that conversations about brain health, MCI, and dementia are challenging, but there are helpful strategies for starting a dialogue, communicating a diagnosis of MCI or dementia, and improving interactions with patients even as cognitive symptoms progress.

Let's explore some practical ways to begin these conversations.

- First, when you bring up the topic of brain health, consider screening older adults for hearing and vision loss. These deficits can interfere with effective communication and are modifiable risk factors for cognitive decline.
- Next, normalize the conversation. Introduce brain health as a routine topic and continue the conversation across visits to help patients feel more comfortable with the topic.
- Ask patients about memory or cognitive concerns and whether they have noticed any changes.
- Actively listen to both patients and family members. Thoughtful responses can prompt patients and family members to be more willing to share information. This is important because family members may be able to provide valuable insights about cognition-related symptoms and behaviors.
- Observe patients for subtle signs of cognitive impairment during your interactions, such as difficulty following conversations or recalling information.
- Consider adding a question about memory or cognition to health questionnaires that patients complete before appointments.
- Finally, leverage your EMR system to flag modifiable risk factors and prompt discussions during appointments.

These strategies may seem to be simple and straightforward, but there are often barriers that need to be addressed.

- Many patients feel embarrassed or ashamed about cognitive concerns due to the stigma surrounding dementia, and it's unlikely they know the differences between normal aging and clinical cognitive decline. To overcome this barrier, take the lead and treat these discussions as routine to normalize the topic and reduce stigma.
- Media portrayals of Alzheimer's disease as a terminal illness contribute to fear and skepticism. Educate patients about evidence-based interventions and provide clear, concise information on how these can help.
- Recognize that cultural norms influence how patients approach cognitive concerns. There may be language barriers and limited access to appropriate healthcare. Be sure to tailor your approach to reflect patients' social and cultural context, and partner with community resources when needed to bridge gaps.

So, you've had discussions about brain health with a patient. What if that patient has MCI or dementia? What is the best way to communicate the diagnosis? In a recent study, patients and caregivers indicated what they would want from clinicians in this situation: clear and empathetic communication, education, discussion of next steps, and access to care and support resources. Some best practices include:

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- Fostering relationships with patients and caregivers by building rapport through empathetic communication, and maintaining connections with patients and families.
- Educating patients and family by explaining how the diagnosis was reached, providing information about disease progression and expectations, and following up to ensure patients and families understand the information shared
- Taking a family-centered approach by meeting with family members prior to the diagnosis, when possible, and involving the caregiver or family when to discuss the diagnosis and include them in care planning.

Dementia affects language skills, making communication increasingly difficult over time. However, nonverbal cues often become more important than words. Here are tips to improve interactions with patients as symptoms worsen:

- Treat patients with dignity and respect, always addressing them as adults.
- Learn about the patient as a person, including their hobbies, likes, and dislikes.
- Pay close attention to their emotions and respond with empathy.
- Be mindful of your own nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice

Don't wait to bring up brain health with your patients! Begin the conversation now and continue it over time. Ask about cognitive concerns, engage family members, and tailor your approach to each patient's social and cultural context. Foster relationships with patients and families and adjust your communication strategies as symptoms worsen.

Effective communication is critical for supporting brain health and improving care for patients with dementia. By applying these strategies, you can make a meaningful difference in the lives of patients and their families, both today and in the future.

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