

Aging in Place Salt Spring Style: What Did You Forget?

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“Your grandmother’s hands are cracked,” her friend told my niece. “Why don’t you buy her hand lotion?” My niece visits my mother at her assisted living residence twice a week and sees to her needs. Was she shirking her duty?

“I’ve bought Grandma two bottles of lotion in the past two weeks,” she told me. “I don’t know what she does with them.” Later, she discovered that my 93-year-old mother was storing them in her bar fridge. When I asked my mother why she thought she put her hand lotion in the fridge, she asked, “What’s hand lotion?” When I explained, she asked, “What does it look like?”

People experiencing dementia often become confused, losing the ability to distinguish, for example, between a plastic bottle of hand lotion from one filled with milk. I’ll never forget the day when my late loved one took a swig from a plastic bottle of drain cleaner, perhaps mistaking it for mouth wash.

When does dementia start? Does it begin, for example, with forgetting where we parked our car? Maybe so; but forgetting like this may also be a case of “benign forgetfulness,” an affliction that affects practically everyone over the age of 65.

The key is this: If we have a healthy brain, we can usually avoid the problem by being mindful about where we park. If we forget anyway we can retrace our steps and reconstruct what happened. At a Victoria garage three hours after I parked there, I looked at my watch. Just enough time to catch the next ferry, I decided as I walked up the steps. I'd been mindful about the correct doorway—third floor, yellow—and I remembered my car was near the beginning of its row. Nevertheless, it wasn't where I expected it to be!

Retracing my steps to the doorway, I reconstructed my parking experience. The angle had been tight and I had to back up and try again. A car coming around the corner had screeched to a halt. My mind now focused, I remembered *the angle* at which I'd parked.

A few minutes earlier, I'd let my mind drift into ferry land. On their own, my feet found their way up to level four where the cars were parked *at the wrong angle*. Back on the third level, I found my car at the other end of the row.

A healthy brain allows us to notice our surroundings, remember them, and understand how things work. The brain cells of people with dementia are increasingly unable to do these things. Vascular dementia can result when arteries are so clogged with plaque they don't let enough oxygenated blood get to the brain. Brain cells begin to die. Or the plaques and tangles of Alzheimer's disease turn the brain to mush. Either way (and others too), we can't process our surroundings and we become confused.

How can you tell if you—or your loved one—has dementia? Apparently, a lot of people want to know the answer to that question. A few weeks ago, Ohio State University announced the availability of the Self-Administered Gerocognitive Exam, SAGE for short. So many people

tried to log on to medicalcenter.osu after the six o'clock news, their website crashed!

The SAGE test is remarkably similar to the mini mental assessment your doctor might administer. The main difference is you can take the SAGE test in the comfort of your own home. Ohio State gerontologists—in other words, doctors who study diseases of aging—recommend everyone over fifty take the SAGE test on an annual basis and give the results to their doctor for assessment.

If you think your loved one has dementia, then you need help. See your doctor and try to come to the Caregivers Support Group at the Seniors Services Society. We provide information and emotional support to people who take care of loved ones with dementia. Caregivers find that providing what soon turns into 24/7 care is stressful. The Caregivers Support Group meets every Wednesday morning from eleven to noon. Some gather first at 10:30 for meditation which serves to calm us. Most agree our weekly sessions are a life saver.

The Seniors' Services Society is also sponsoring an Alzheimer's Awareness program on Wednesday, February 26 at 2 p.m. If you need more information, be sure to come. The Seniors Services Society is located across from Country Grocer at 379 Lower Ganges Road.