

Cognitive decline—“Where did I leave my keys?”—manifests in many ways, and one of the tasks for Raleigh Psychiatrist Dr. Mona Gupta is to sort out symptoms and other clues in a way that leads to effective treatment.

“The fact is, some people experience cognitive decline because they’re depressed, which of course is a treatable condition,” she notes. “I have 30-year-olds coming to me because they feel certain they have early-onset dementia. And commonly, after evaluation, what we discover is that they are dealing with a form of depression I call pseudo-dementia.

“If someone is in fact suffering with depression they frequently have issues that are very common in cognitive decline. Often, their short-term memory is affected, and they may have problems at times finding the right words to express themselves.

“They may have issues with language and concentration. In more extreme instances, they may feel like they’re losing their minds, and that they in fact have early-onset

Alzheimer’s—but the truth is they are simply depressed and once we get the condition treated effectively we see rapid response in the resolution of these symptoms. Pretty quickly, they regain the sense of their normal self.”

Health&Healing: There is a tendency, it seems, to relate depression to aging rather than simply considering it a medical condition.

DR. GUPTA: In fact, depression wears many costumes. There is situational depression, where the patient is reacting to a difficult, often life-changing event: the loss of a loved one, or a cherished job, for example. And then, quite sharply defined, there is what I call chemical depression, which may be the result of a depletion of serotonin or other neurotransmitters, or the use of substances such as cocaine or even pain medication. I’ve treated patients with depression caused by blood pressure medication, or the use of beta blockers. The condition can present at any age, from childhood well into the later stages of life.

He&H: Sorting that out can be challenging.

DR. GUPTA: You have to do some research. A patient may come in and say “I need a CAT scan or an MRI because I feel certain I have Alzheimer’s.” And so I will gently point out that neither a CAT scan or an MRI is helpful in identifying Alzheimer’s. An important key is simply listening in a focused way. If you’re a good listener, you will, at some point, figure out what is actually going on in a person’s life, figure out the cause of symptoms, and then help ease their concern that they are in fact losing their minds.

He&H: Chronic health problems are clearly an issue. One report claimed 80 percent of older adults have at least one chronic health condition, and 50 percent have two or more chronic health conditions.

DR. GUPTA: This introduces still another variation of dementia. Vascular dementia is usually related to some kind of underlying cardiovascular problem, such as hypertension or other heart conditions or, in some cases, diabetes. It is the second most common type of dementia, accounting for 40 percent of dementia cases in older adults.

The condition is caused by reduced blood flow to the brain—usually the result of a stroke or a series of very small strokes. It results in subtle, progressive decline in memory and cognitive functioning.

A diagnosis of a serious health issue, such as cancer, can provoke depression. If your mind is focused on issues of morbidity or survival, it is obviously not going to be as sharp and focused when you do your work or read a book.

And nutrition and vitamin supplementation is an important issue. Our brains need a steady diet of good, fresh, nutritious food, and the support of folic acid and vitamin B12 and other supplements to support our minds and bodies. I certainly encourage my patients to avoid junk food and make good nutrition a priority in their lives.

He&H: Do you have a prescription you offer 50+ people to promote good mental, physical and emotional health as they age?

DR. GUPTA: Many of my patients are retired from work, so they spend a lot of time at home and generally they are simply not as active as they used to be. Typically, they are not getting up and going out, looking for new and challenging things to do with their lives. They’re not exercising as much as in the past, if at all, and often, frankly, they’re not using their minds as frequently in an active, engaged way. They may read a book occasionally, but more typically they’re watching a lot of television.

I encourage many of these patients to in effect take their minds to the gym. Sudoku, word games, crossword puzzles, and reading good books all help keep our minds sharp and active. Some—not many, but some—of my senior patients are having great fun, and challenging times, learning to use iPads and other digital devices. And others, bless them, are volunteering in a number of useful, creative ways, and as a consequence they are out of the house and experiencing a good deal of social interaction. These are hallmarks of good health for seniors.

My mother, Dr. Shobha Gupta, is now 64 and she is my model for living an interesting and productive life in our senior years. She continues her full time practice as a psychiatrist in south Florida, and of course a lot of her patients are also seniors. She is very active, and is always reading, staying on top of her career. And my father continues his practice, as well, as a gastroenterologist. *h&h*

Cognitive Decline *or Depression?*



Dr. Gupta, right, with her support staff.

“Some people experience cognitive decline because they’re depressed, which of course is a treatable condition.”

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Dr. Gupta agrees that her training as an osteopathic physician has given her a more holistic understanding of mind-body issues. She attended Nova Southeastern University College of Osteopathic Medicine, in Florida, and went on to complete a four-year residency in psychiatry at the Baptist Medical Center at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem.

“It’s true,” she says, “that osteopaths emphasize the importance of the musculoskeletal system, holistic medicine, proper nutrition, and environmental factors in maintaining good health.”

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