

LESSONS LEARNED THE STAGES OF ALZHEIMER'S

When I first became aware of Alzheimer's, I read about its three stages. Then I noticed in some other articles that it was described as having seven stages. Of course, I decided to go with the seven stages. After all, being in stage one of seven is a lot better than being in stage one of three, right?

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. The three-stage model is, of course, the simpler one to go by. The seven-stage model allows for greater specificity of diagnostic tests. It also allows for more nuanced home care and directives. For example, many people with Alzheimer's feel they can drive their cars right through the second of three stages, and their caregivers tend to relent. Advised, instead, that driving into the third stage of the seven-stage model is risky, caregivers tend to end their loved ones' driving days sooner, as they should.

The Three-Stage Model:

Stage One: Mild/Early

Short-term memory loss becomes apparent, especially in regard to recent conversations and events. The patient may ask questions repeatedly and struggle in speech to find common words. Writing may become difficult. Hand-to-eye coordination may become somewhat impaired: handling silverware at the table, for example, may be a challenge. All these symptoms may bring on, or be accompanied by, mood swings and depression and/or apathy. Driving may also be an issue. Generally, Stage One lasts two to four years.

Stage Two: Moderate/Middle

Long-term memory loss becomes evident now, too; childhood recollections may fade, and the patient may have trouble recognizing family members and other familiar faces. There is general difficulty understanding current events, confusion about time, and loss of awareness of place, even of one's own home. There are more dramatic mood swings and depression, along with fits of anger and aggression; also uninhibited behavior. Sleeplessness is common; so is sleeping too much. Delusions may occur. There are physical tremors and general slowness, and difficulties in dressing and toileting. Generally, this stage lasts from two to ten years.

Stage Three: Severe/Late

There is profound memory loss and an inability to communicate and comprehend others. Round-the-clock help is needed for all personal hygiene as well as to guard against falls. There are issues with swallowing and incontinence. Delusions are common, even prevalent. At the end stage, the patient becomes immobile and unresponsive. Generally, it can last one to three years.

The Seven-Stage Model:

Stage One: There is no impairment; memory and cognitive abilities appear normal.

Stage Two: There are minor, often unnoticed memory lapses; indistinguishable from the normal memory issues of aging.

Stage Three: There is more difficulty finding words; the patient often becomes aware of this before others do and tries to cover it up. Objects are often misplaced; new facts are hard to retain. There are some mood swings and depression.

Stage Four: There is increasing short-term memory loss, and difficulty in completing sequential tasks like cooking and driving. Planning becomes difficult, if not impossible, as are simple mathematical challenges, like balancing a checkbook or just keeping track of loose money. There are greater mood swings and depression.

Stage Five (Early dementia/moderate Alzheimer's): All symptoms are more pronounced now: more severe memory loss, including long-term memory loss; severe diminution in judgment and coordination; driving is a serious risk now.

Stage Six (Middle dementia/moderately severe Alzheimer's): The patient is oblivious to current events; there is little or no long-term memory. Home care is needed for dressing, eating, and toileting. Agitation and delusions are common, especially in the late afternoon or early evening ("sundowning"). There is a failure to recognize family members; suspicion of others. Wandering is quite common.

Stage Seven (Late or severe dementia): Speech becomes limited. There is difficulty walking and sitting. Round-the-clock home care is needed. There is end-stage immobility and unresponsiveness.