



CBWAI AAYUSHI

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World Health Day

Building a fairer, healthier world



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CGHS Beneficiaries' Welfare Association of India

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Dr. Amit Gupta



Dr. Vinod Kumar

"Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind" - Jeffrey Eugenides, Middlesex

Introduction

Holistic well-being depends on a healthy body, brain, mind and spirit. Brain, responsible for our cognitive functions, is a physical structure inside the skull of our body while the mind, responsible for our feelings and emotions, is an abstract concept without structural boundaries. Brain and mind, however are closely interlinked terms, often used interchangeably and control our mental faculties. Human ageing is inevitable and so is the fading away of our body and mind as we enter and advance into old age. It seems body deteriorates faster than mind which explains the plethora of visible physical disorders like diabetes, stroke, heart, lung, kidney, liver and malignant diseases etc. usually emerging much before geriatric mental disorders like anxiety neurosis, depression, dementia and Parkinsonism which are at times not so visible, being non-overt or less florid. It is therefore no wonder that man easily recognizes the virtue of a healthy body and pays more attention to its care through preventive and treatment strategies. Mental changes however, may begin emerging only slowly in an unsuspecting elderly person, either as part of normal ageing process (like age related forgetfulness, slowness in thinking, zest and reaction time and at times like simple stress related anxiety, despair, mood swings, disturbed sleep, coping difficulty and cynicism etc.) or as part of well-defined diseases like anxiety neurosis, depression, dementia etc. Of these, dementia is a disease of the brain as evidenced by widespread pathological changes that can be seen in this organ but in addition to cognitive dysfunctions, there are a host of mind related i.e. psychological symptoms also in this disorder.

Dementia is a relentless, dreadful, life threatening disorder that is without cure or control. This disease is kind of a slow creeper and in the early stages it manifests with changes similar to normal ageing listed above and therefore eludes the diagnosis. Process may be slow for weeks and months and sometimes for years so that family members and the person himself may dismiss these changes as those of normal old age without realizing that the dreadful disease of dementia has already set in. Gradually these patients show up as having problems in remembering things, performing routine familiar tasks, recognizing and communicating with others and losing their executive functions of power of judgment, understanding, comprehension, reasoning and finally suffering from serious behavioral and psychological symptoms, losing control of themselves and becoming dependent on their family members. Dementia is already an exploding epidemic affecting a large number of elderly persons for whom early diagnosis is paramount in order to begin imparting proper care that these patients need so desperately. In addition, not

realizing the presence of dementia in early stages by both the patient and his family members, many such patients are unable to understand the importance of basic preventive strategies against various diseases. Large number of deaths of dementia patients especially in old age homes due to Covid-19 pandemic could be due to non-observance of covid-19 appropriate behavior. This paper highlights various steps to promote health of the brain and mind in an effort to prevent the adverse mental features associated with normal ageing as well as mental disorders of elderly persons with special reference to a brief discussion on dementia.

Dementia-causes, features and overlap with normal ageing individuals:

90 to 95% of cases with dementia are irreversible and untreatable. No one knows the exact cause of dementia. There are many types and causes of dementia. Alzheimer's disease is the most common type. Many medical, socioeconomic and genetic factors play a role in the causation of dementia. Prevention of dementia depends on controlling these predisposing factors. Advancing age is the most important risk factor. Familial and early onset dementia before the age of 60 is possible but uncommon. Those having diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, obesity and excessive blood lipids are more vulnerable. Smokers and sedentary individuals are at greater risk. Women outnumber men. Loneliness and social isolation are important contributory factors and these have assumed special significance during the period of covid-19 pandemic. Lower literacy particularly during the early part of life also contributes. Only about 5% of cases belong to reversible or treatable categories of dementia. These include vitamin B12 deficiency, thyroid hormone deficiency, salt deficiency, chronic kidney and liver diseases, head injury, neurological infections, brain tumors, normal pressure hydrocephalus etc.

Table 1 and 2 summarize features of dementia under A, B, C, D and comparison between normal ageing and dementia patients respectively.

Table 1: Dementia Features (not listed according to progressively advancing stages of dementia)

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CATEGORY	FEATURES
ACTIVITIES OF DAILY LIVING	Patients need help for basic activities of daily living e.g. personal hygiene, bathing, dressing, eating, talking etc.
BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS	Disinterest, repetitive speaking, difficulty in communicating leading to frustration, agitation, depression, shouting, sleep reversal, wandering etc.
COGNITIVE DECLINE	Forgetfulness, misplacing objects, difficulty in thinking, exercising judgment, decision making, recollecting phone numbers and in recognizing persons, objects and places etc.
DISORIENTATION	Confused about time, date, place and persons.

Table 2: Comparison between normal ageing and dementia patients.

NORMAL AGEING INDIVIDUAL	DEMENCIA PATIENT
Does all activities of daily living by himself unless he is too weak or disabled. Observes social etiquettes.	May have difficulty doing activities of daily living at some stage of disease even if he has strength. May do socially unacceptable acts in public.
Has no difficulty in communicating, will not keep asking a question repeatedly or wander.	May have difficulty in communicating, may keep asking a question repeatedly or wander.
On misplacing an object, he will know what object he has misplaced and will try to search.	A dementia patient will not even remember what object he had misplaced. May not even remember that he had forgotten something.
Recognises a friend who is meeting after a long time but may have difficulty in remembering his name for a while.	Sometimes unable to even recognise his close friend, relative or even loved and dear one.
May have difficulty in recalling the day or date on a given day.	May have difficulty in even knowing if it is morning, noon, evening or night.
May not remember a street if visiting there after a long time.	May even forget his way to his own bedroom or bathroom.
May forget to collect balance money from a shopkeeper.	Repeatedly unable to carry out proper calculation while shopping.

NOTE:Not knowing the function of a tooth brush or telephone, wearing a woolen during summer, placing the empty cup of tea in the fridge instead of wash basin, failing to distinguish between a red carrot and a white radish or unable to properly wear his clothes are some other examples that a dementia patient may show.

Strategies to stay mentally active:

Body, brain, mind and spirit are Nature's precious gifts to man and are interrelated with each other. All these four assets have to be kept protected and maintained for our holistic health. 'A healthy mind begets a healthy body and a healthy body begets a healthy mind' is an example of this inter-relationship. In other words, keeping high all the quotients, the Physical Quotient (PQ-relates to physical body), Intellectual Quotient (IQ-relates to cognitive brain), Emotional Quotient (EQ-relates to thoughtful mind) and Spiritual Quotient (SQ-relates to spirituality) is the surest way not only to prevent age related diseases but also to prevent adverse effects of normal ageing. Self-caring for all these dimensions is however a lifelong process and there is no shortcut to longevity. Yet it is never too late to begin self-caring. Earlier it begins, the better it is. Following a brief comment first on physical health, discussion on various steps has been provided below to enhance the health of the brain and mind by raising our IQ, EQ and SQ through cognitive, emotional and spiritual stimulating activities respectively.

Physical health (Body): Body is an indirect determinant of an active mind. Prevention and control of various predisposing medical and socioeconomic disorders and treatment of reversible causes of dementia listed above can prevent dementia too. However, caring of physical body through personal hygiene, balanced nutrition, and physical activity, avoidance of tobacco, alcohol, pollution and extremes of weather coupled with regular health checkups and treatment of coexisting chronic diseases is too well known to maintain our physical health and need not be discussed any further.

Cognitive health (Brain): An active brain stands in good stead against age related forgetfulness, slowness of reaction time, attention, thinking and zest. It is also useful against dysfunctions listed above for dementia under cognitive decline (Table 1) and may have a potentially preventive value against this disorder. As they say, therefore, heed the head and be a lifelong learner. Brain can be challenged by numerous actions to keep it active. Contrary to earlier belief, brain cells i.e. neurons have the capacity to regenerate. Main focus is to remain mentally engaged especially through kinds of activities and new tasks which are able to stimulate the brain to work. Table 3 outlines some of these activities especially useful for elderly persons.

Table 3: Cognitive enhancing activities for brain health.

NOTE: Apart from enhancing immunity, listening to music also helps intelligence, memory and

ACTIVITIES	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
A ccomplish new tasks	Like new reading, preparing and listening to lectures, learning new musical instruments etc.
B efriend grandchildren	To play puzzles and other mental games, engage with them in story-telling, playing riddles, antakshri etc.
C hess playing and other games with friends and family	Other indoor games e.g. video games, carom and cards.
D ominant and non-dominant hand use	This is useful to stimulate both sides of the brain. Knitting is an example especially for women.
E xplore the internet	Learning and using a computer is like treading in uncharted waters and is mentally stimulating. But excessive use is addictive.
F un with puzzles for self	Crossword puzzles for old timers. Besides, many recent puzzles and brain games of various kinds are available.
G ardening	Not simply a hobby but planning a garden too since arranging the plants and flower pots is also stimulatory.
H ealthy humor	These can evoke a mental reaction for exchanging jokes. Laughter is the best medicine too.
I mbibe a new language and skill	It is a good new task for brain health in old age. Figuring out how to tweet or skype is also useful.

cognition and is supposed to stimulate both sides of the brain.

Emotional health (Mind): This covers both the psychological and social health. An active, alert and positive mind has proven value in warding off age related anxiety, despair, mood swings, disturbed sleep and disturbed emotions. It may also have a preventive value against some of the behavior problems listed for dementia (Table 1). Positivity of mind is often talked about but only few understand it. It is simply this. If you don't find anybody whom you dislike, you are positive and vice versa. Keeping cool and emotions under control, understanding not only one's own feelings but also those of others assigns a high degree of emotional intelligence. Those who love their pets understand their feelings too.

Actions that keep the mind active and positive are essentially relaxation or de-stressing methods. Spiritual practices are one of them but they are detailed below under the next section. Apart from cognitive stimulation mentioned above, listening to music particularly the devotional music mitigates anxiety, depression and fatigue and improves mood, emotions and attention. This beneficial effect is exerted in part through reducing the stress hormone, cortisol. Then music also increases melatonin hormone thereby improving one's sleep. As already alluded to, music is known to stimulate both sides of the brain. Keeness for interaction with others, ability to develop relationships, friendliness and becoming the life of a party are additional useful measures for mental health. Socializing by networking with friends, attending functions, engaging in group hobbies and volunteering both by face to face or virtual interaction, group engaging activities of various physical and mental exercises and group reminiscences are also useful. Living in a clean environment adds to a sense of self-esteem and dignity.

Spiritual health: Like the 5 senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch ensure our quality of life, spirituality is our sixth sense to do so but it is a lesser known sense. Spirituality connects us with the goodness of the universe or a divine power, enables us to cope with challenges of life and therefore maintains our emotional and cognitive health even during the times of stress. In times of serious challenges like bereavements or during terminal illness, everyone remembers some divine spiritual strength and tries to draw solace, hope and contentment. As mentioned below, spirituality is also important for providing overall health benefits during normal times of life. In essence, spirituality means asking the question why we are here and what is the purpose and meaning of our life and getting the most frequent answer that implies service to others by giving, helping, caring or extending benefit to others. Since spirituality has unquestionable benefits on mental or even physical health, it has to be promoted by the individual for his own benefit. Spirituality is more than religiousness. Different vehicles for enhancing spirituality include practice of

yoga and its principles of ethical living enshrined in Yama and Niyama, practice of pranayama and meditation, praying, worshiping, reading sacred texts, listening to devotional bhajans, going for pilgrimages, vegetarianism, intermittent fasting, watching the Mother Nature and believing in the humane traits of forgiveness, optimism, introspection, compassion and straight forwardness. Health benefits of spirituality can be enumerated as (i) improvement in quality of life, self-esteem, sleep and longevity, (ii) benefit in emotional disorders, body pains, cognitive impairment, dementia and, through ethical living and lifestyle practices, benefit in even the physical disorders like hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, emphysema, cirrhosis, pneumonia and cancer, (iii) reduction of despair of old age decline and (iv) stabilization of our thoughts towards death and dying even if physical health is failing. It is considered that mechanism of many of these health benefits is through lowering of stress hormone cortisol, cellular inflammatory markers like C-reactive protein, interleukin-6 and by improving cardiovascular, nervous, immune and kidney functions.

Disclaimer: Statements and observations contained in this paper are for only informational purposes. Author takes no responsibility for their practical applicability to matters of health, wellness, or well-being etc.

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