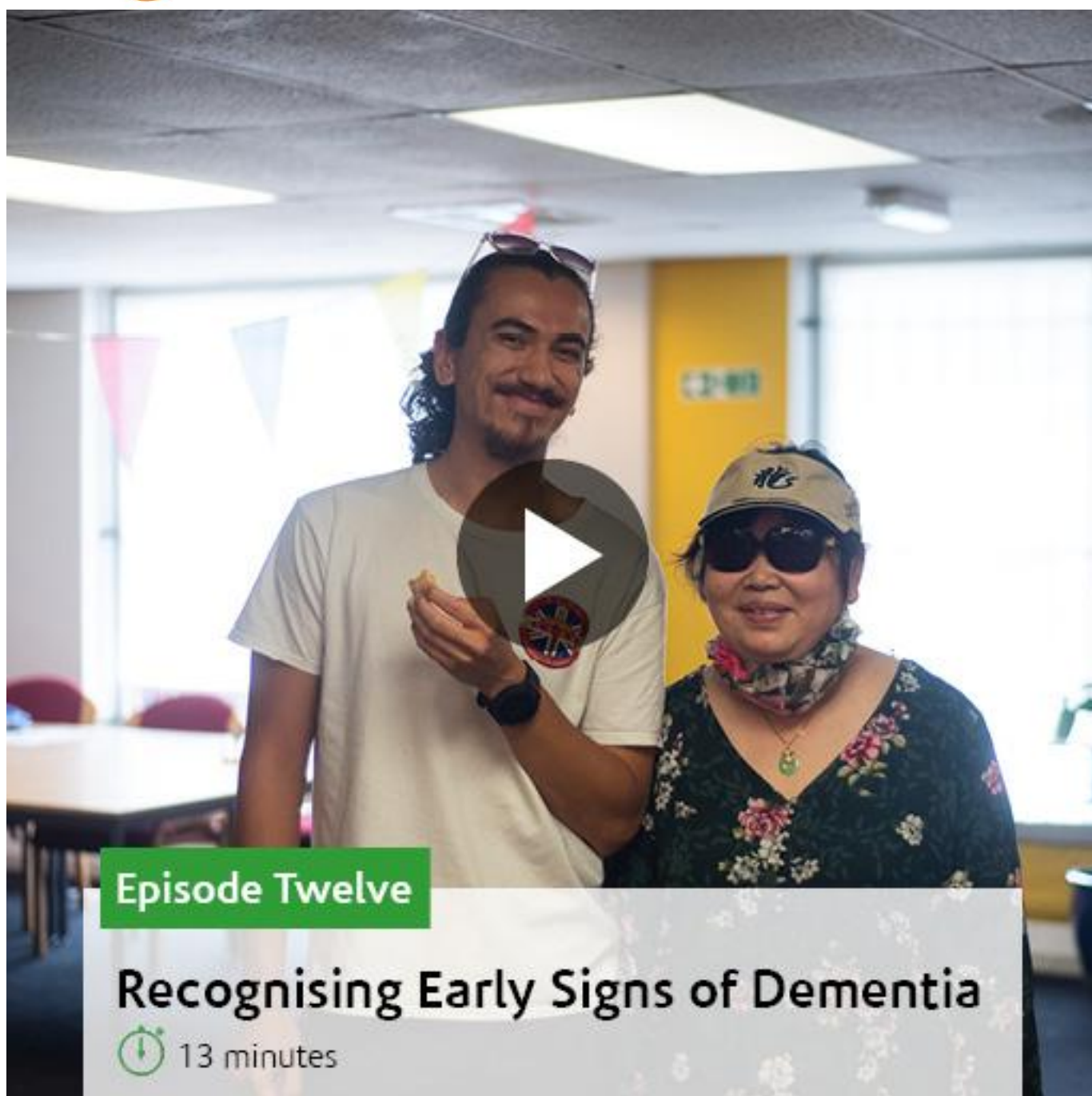


Age Old Problems: New Aged Care



A podcast by Helping Hand



Age Old Problems: New Aged Care
Episode 12: Recognising the Early Signs of Dementia


Helping Hand

00:00:00 Kate

Welcome to *Age Old Problems: New Aged Care*, a podcast by Helping Hand that offers information and advice to help you find and access the right aged care services. This podcast was recorded on Kauria land.

00:00:22 Kate

Hello and welcome to another episode of *Age Old Problems: New Aged Care*. I'm your host, Kate Holland. Did you know that it's estimated that in Australia there are more than 433,000 people living with dementia? So with this knowledge at hand, we've decided to devote three episodes to understanding it better. And this one's the first.

00:00:40 Kate

Dementia is not a normal part of getting older. Instead, it's a broad term that describes a collection of symptoms caused by disorders affecting the brain. And while everyone's experience is unique, there are some early warning signs that you can look out for. Joining me to help you understand all of this a bit better is Tanya McIver, who is Group Manager of Residential Services at Helping Hand. Welcome Tanya.

00:01:00 Tanya

Thank you Kate.

00:01:01 Kate

So can you start by telling me a little bit about your role at Helping Hand. What does that involve?

00:01:05 Tanya

My background is clinical and a registered nurse, and currently I oversee and support four of our residential aged care homes at Helping Hand. And that's supporting them with their clinical care, operational care, family and staff care.

00:01:18 Kate

Great. So how does that tie into understanding dementia? Can you talk me through your background and your experience in working with people with dementia?

00:01:25 Tanya

Sure. I was at university and worked as a carer while I was doing my registered nurse training. I moved into acute for a while, but always had an absolute love and passion for delivering respectful, dignified care to our older Australians, so I've been back in aged care for over 20 years, managing homes, and am very passionate about supporting staff involvement to ensure that there's respect and dignity at all times.

00:01:49 Kate

And you did mention to me before we started this, you were drawn to work in aged care and with other people, why was that?

00:01:54 Tanya

The older people have created this country that we live in, and people deserve care, and they deserve the absolute best care after all the work that they've done to create this beautiful place that we live in. Staff need to respect, understand, and then make sure that we're giving them the best experience possible in aged care, which is their final home.

00:02:15 Kate

So dementia, which unfortunately does impact a lot of people. So it's not just one disease. How can you define dementia and what are some of the diseases that are linked with it?

00:02:23 Tanya

So there are a lot of different variants of dementia. There's some that are diagnosed as part of another condition, like a Parkinson's can lead to a dementia. There's different parts of the brain that can be impacted which develop like a frontal lobe dementia, which will give different signs and symptoms. So there's lots of early signs that people will pick up at home across that variety of disease diagnoses.

00:02:46 Kate

So is that why it appears quite differently in different people because of the condition leading towards it?

00:02:51 Tanya

It does. Because of different areas of the brain that it can affect, because different parts of our brain control different parts of our emotion, personality and behaviours. So there are different ways that signs and symptoms can come, and also people are individuals. So it impacts individuals differently and sometimes because of their life experience and lived experience, it will impact someone differently.

00:03:13 Kate

The differences aside and what leads to it aside, what are some of the common early signs of dementia that people might be able to look out for?

00:03:20 Tanya

You see, there's the forgetting things, but it's not just where's my car keys. It's actually. I don't know where my bathroom is. I'm at my front door and I haven't just forgotten my keys. I'm not sure if I know where my car is, so there's the small forgetful things. People can also become very repetitive, so you might start to see someone ask the same thing over and over again, and no matter how many times you give the answer, that person is not able to retain it. Real changes in routine, often people are awake a lot at night, so that can change. And there's also the fear of security, so people might go out their front door and not be sure where they are, so that's when safety becomes a concern. And changes in someone's personality, you might start to look and go, well, that's just not like mum. She doesn't do that. So things that are really out of character. It's sort of a myth that it's just, I'll just start to forget things – there's some critical personality changes that might start to get you worried that something's going on.

00:04:18 Kate

I have heard, actually through personal experience, that not being able to deal with basic numbers and things like that, is that another indicator?

00:04:23 Tanya

Definitely. Something that's always been familiar to a person, and you just forget your sequencing, so things no longer make sense and, you know, I've looked after people who are, say, school teachers that no longer can process putting prose and language together. Mathematicians, doctors, that just lose those real basic things that have been part of their life, and that has been what makes them who they are.

00:04:50 Kate

Can you sense their frustration with that?

00:04:52 Tanya

The early signs of dementia, and living with dementia early in life, is incredibly frustrating. Because you have moments of absolute clarity where you think, 'what on earth am I doing?' and that's confronting and embarrassing for some people, especially people that have had very high pride in what they do. It can become very embarrassing trying to understand why you're doing what you're doing.

00:05:15 Kate

It must be a bit frightening for them if they start to be suspicious that this is something that's becoming a problem. And then for family members, if they start to detect some things like these, where's the best place for them to turn for help or advice? If they're suspicious that maybe some of this forgetting is a bit more significant than the rest of us losing our keys, which we all do?

00:05:33 Tanya

Yes, there's some really good starting points. Often people find that if they've got a family GP, it's a really good place to start, because if you've got that relationship, they will also support understanding. There's organisations such as Dementia Support Australia, there's dementia hotlines that you can call. There are really great external supports, and also your own friends and family. So it's, you know, opening up and just saying, look, I think this is what's happening and asking for help. But absolutely the first starting point is your GP.

00:06:05 Kate

Great. Well, we'll make sure we put some links in the show notes for Dementia Australia, etcetera. So people know where to turn to. What about broaching the recognition of these signs with the loved one that you think might be behaving differently than you've seen before? How's what's the best way to broach that?

00:06:18 Tanya

Again, it's very individual. Some people will be really open to it. A diagnosis of dementia is absolutely life changing. And if the person's living with dementia, their ability to process that may be very varied, so it's gauging where they're at as far as coping, and at that point, sometimes the real care has to go to the caregivers themselves to support them with it. Because sometimes you have to explain over and over again, so it's not just saying on one occasion you've got dementia. It may be a daily and hourly recurrence of that person having no insight into that diagnosis.

00:06:59 Kate

What about anger or frustration that you're saying to somebody you think this might be the situation? Do some people push back and just not want to hear it?

00:07:05 Tanya

Absolutely, because it is confronting and it's uncomfortable to think that you might have that. Plus in the early stages, you know, you do come in and out of understanding. So when you are able to process it, it's really scary. When you're not able to process it, you don't understand why people are saying that to you. That's when you could become quite upset and agitated about it, and that's not fun.

00:07:27 Kate

You don't want to see your loved one upset. But am I right in thinking that the earlier that you address this situation, the better?

00:07:34 Tanya

Yeah, absolutely. If possible, that is the best way to get the help. There are medications in very early stages and that's why it's important to get that medical support from a GP who may then refer on to a geriatrician who specialises, so there are people that specialise in looking after people with dementia. So the sooner you can get to it, the better. And it also allows you to start changing your environment at home to support. So if you start to understand and get help for the symptoms, you may be able to then change your environment to support their wellbeing even longer.

00:08:06 Kate

And those support lines you talked about before, do they also provide support and advice for the carer as they're trying to deal with this?

00:08:11 Tanya

Yes, there's incredible support for carers because it's a 24 hour job when you start caring for someone. So places like Dementia Support Australia have incredible hotlines. They have a whole series of training and podcasts and courses that you can actually do, that will support you to understand what's happening, and give you some tips and some help, and also keep showing you different places to go for that help, and also allows you to connect with the community that's going through the same thing as you are.

00:08:41 Kate

Which is really, really helpful, isn't it, when you can relate – because not everybody can understand if they're not going through it themselves. So is it possible for people living with dementia to remain at home?

00:08:52 Tanya

Yes, for a period of time, it absolutely can be. And there there's ways of supporting that to happen. It may be decluttering your home, it may be putting some signage up, using different colours, ensuring familiar items are around, getting some help, bringing people in to help you, some home care so that you can have a break yourself. Because home is such a familiar environment, so if someone can stay at home for a longer period of time, it's just so important. So there are people that can come in and do that, so home care is a great way to bring carers in if that helps out, because there may be times where the person living with dementia is now struggling to even sequence a shower, so you bring someone in to do that and get support for the caregiver as well.

00:09:38 Kate

But the familiarity for them living at home, that's very reassuring, isn't.

00:09:42 Tanya

Oh it is. It's all the familiar things. It's where the memories are. It's, you know, where the photos are. That may help them orientate themselves to time and place again. And all those familiar items that are really important.

00:09:54 Kate

Now I imagine the answer to this question is varied, because we've already talked about the fact that everyone experiences this differently. But how long can people with dementia, or people living with dementia, usually stay at home?

00:10:04 Tanya

Totally varied. It depends on what signs and symptoms become more prevalent, when safety becomes an issue, that's usually the trick. The two real triggers to have to come into care are safety of the person living with dementia, or carer fatigue for the person caring for someone with dementia. When someone is at risk of leaving the home in the middle of the night and getting lost, it's time to think about do we need a more secure environment? If someone's unable to even get the just general personal care and they're at risk of other things like infection or skin breakdown, it's really time to think about coming into care. Home services are great, but ultimately we have to look after the people looking after people with dementia as well. And if it gets to the point, you know, sometimes we call it the breaking point or the crisis point. It's important to know that there's incredible services available that can pick your loved one up, like residential aged care, and bring them into a safe place to land.

00:11:05 Kate

Now we're going to do a whole other episode about residential aged care and why that's very beneficial for both the person who's living with dementia and their family. But before we wrap this one, if someone was going to reflect on listening to this episode, what would be sort of key advice or key things you'd like them to remember? Maybe in terms of what they should really look out for, and how they should broach it with a loved one if they think that maybe there's some signs happening?

00:11:29 Tanya

The most important thing to remember is you know your person the best. You are gonna pick up the signs sooner than anyone else, because of your relationship with your person. That is really hard to do, but there's so many services to help and the sooner you can open up, discuss it, bring that help in the sooner you'll actually feel you can get the support and wrap around that person and give them all the care and support that they need.

00:11:53 Kate

That's great. That's a really good insight and understanding and while we know that it is going to affect people differently, there are some really key things people can look out for there. So thank you so much for joining us, and we'll speak to you again soon.

00:12:04 Tanya

Thanks, Kate.

00:12:11 Kate

For more information on Helping Hand and their services please head to www.helpinghand.org.au or call Helping Hand directly on 1300 653 600.