

Dementia signs families often miss

When people think of dementia, they usually think of memory loss. A name that will not come. A repeated question. But for many families, the first changes they notice are not about memory at all. They are changes in mood, behaviour, and personality that are easy to explain away.

Perhaps a parent has become quieter, or has stopped doing things they always loved. Perhaps they seem more anxious, more irritable, or somehow not quite themselves. Families often sense that something is different long before they can name it, and many quietly worry alone.

This guide looks at the early changes families often miss, why they get overlooked, and what to do if you are noticing them in someone you love. Noticing is not diagnosing. Many of these changes have other causes, and some of those causes are treatable. What matters is knowing when a conversation with a doctor is worthwhile.





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Why memory isn't the whole picture

Dementia is not a single condition. It is a group of conditions that affect the brain, and memory is only one of the things the brain does. Depending on which areas are affected first, the earliest changes can show up in mood, motivation, language, judgement, or behaviour.

This is why some people develop noticeable memory problems early on, while others hold onto their memory for some time but change in other ways. A person can still recall names and dates while becoming a quieter, flatter, or more anxious version of themselves.

Families are often better placed to notice these changes than anyone else. You know what is normal for the person. A doctor meeting them for twenty minutes may see nothing unusual, while you can see that something has shifted over months.

That knowledge is valuable. Trusting it does not mean assuming the worst. It means taking what you have noticed seriously enough to understand it.



Changes families often notice first

These are some of the early changes that families describe, often only recognising them in hindsight. Noticing one or two, on their own, rarely means dementia. What matters is a pattern of change from how the person used to be, that persists and gradually builds.



Withdrawing from things they enjoyed. Stepping back from hobbies, friends, or family gatherings. Sometimes this is because familiar activities have quietly become harder to follow or keep up with.



Losing interest or drive. Seeming flat, passive, or content to sit for hours. Plans that once excited them no longer seem to register. This is often mistaken for laziness or low mood.



Mood changes that seem out of character. More anxious, more easily upset, more irritable, or less patient than they used to be. Some people become suspicious of others, or unusually emotional. Others seem strangely unbothered by things that should matter to them.



Struggling with familiar tasks. Trouble following a recipe they have cooked for years, managing money, or keeping track of bills and appointments. Judgement and planning are often affected before memory.



Changes in conversation. Losing the thread of discussions, repeating themselves, struggling for everyday words, or leaning on a partner to answer for them. Some people talk less because keeping up has become tiring.



A change in confidence. Hesitating over decisions they would once have made easily, avoiding driving or unfamiliar places, or becoming unusually reliant on routines and on other people.



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Why these changes get missed

These signs are easy to miss precisely because they have so many other explanations. Tiredness. Stress. Grief. Retirement. Getting older. Each change, taken alone, can be reasonably put down to something else, and often is, for years.

The changes are also gradual. Families adjust without noticing they are adjusting. You start answering for someone, taking over the bills, or choosing simpler plans, and the shift becomes the new normal.

The person themselves may play a part too. Many people sense their own changes and work hard to cover them, keeping conversations light, deflecting with humour, or avoiding situations that might catch them out. Some genuinely do not recognise that anything has changed, which is itself part of how these conditions can affect the brain.

And sometimes families do notice, but hold back. Naming it feels disloyal, or frightening, or premature. It is a hard thing to look at directly, and no one wants to be wrong in either direction.



What to do if you are noticing changes

Watch the pattern, not the moment. Everyone has off days, lost words, and forgotten names. What matters is change from how the person used to be, across weeks and months. Keeping a private note of what you notice, with rough dates, can help you see the picture clearly.

Talk to them gently, when things are calm. Lead with care rather than conclusions. You might say that you have noticed they seem quieter lately, and ask how they are feeling in themselves. Let it be a conversation, not a verdict, and be ready for it to take more than one attempt.

Encourage a doctor's appointment. A doctor can look at the whole picture. This matters because several treatable things can cause similar changes, including low mood, stress, thyroid problems, vitamin deficiencies, infections, hearing loss, and medication side effects. Suggesting a general check-up is often an easier first step than naming dementia.

If it is dementia, knowing helps. An early diagnosis opens the door to treatment, support, and planning while the person can still shape their own decisions. Families consistently say that understanding what they were dealing with, even when the news was hard, was better than the years of not knowing.

Starting the conversation can sound like:

- *"You've seemed a bit quieter lately. How have you been feeling in yourself?"*
- *"I've noticed a few things seem harder than they used to be. Have you noticed that too?"*
- *"Would you come with me to the doctor for a general check-up? It would put my mind at rest."*

One conversation rarely settles it, and it does not need to. What matters is opening the door gently, and keeping it open.



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Looking after yourself through this

Worrying about someone you love carries its own weight. You may be carrying it quietly, unsure whether your concern is justified, and reluctant to share it in case saying it aloud makes it real.

There can be grief in this stage too, even before any diagnosis. Noticing changes in a parent or partner can bring a sense of losing pieces of the person while they are still with you. That feeling is real, and it deserves support, whatever the eventual explanation turns out to be.

If you are working while you carry this, the weight follows you there too. Concentration slips in meetings. Appointments need arranging in working hours. You may be fielding calls from a parent, or about one, in the middle of your day. Many people manage all of this without telling anyone at work. You do not have to name the situation in full to ask for a little flexibility, and you do not have to be a formal carer for the strain to count.



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At HealthHero, we often speak to people who have been worrying about a parent or partner for months before saying it to anyone. Many feel guilty for even thinking about dementia, as if noticing were a betrayal. It is not. Noticing is an act of care. Whatever is behind the changes, you do not have to carry the worry alone, and getting support for yourself is not a luxury. It is what makes it possible to keep showing up for the person you are worried about.



When to reach out, and how HealthHero can help

It may help to reach out if worry about someone is affecting your sleep, mood, or focus, if you are struggling with the conversations this situation is asking of you, or if you are supporting someone through assessment or diagnosis and feeling the strain.

How HealthHero can help

Concerns about dementia are assessed by a doctor, and the weight this places on families deserves support of its own.

Through your EAP, you can speak to a qualified counsellor in confidence, at a time that suits you. You can

talk through what you are noticing and feeling, prepare for difficult conversations, and get support for the worry, sadness, or strain of caring for someone as things change.



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Contact HealthHero today for more support and advice. We're with you every step of the way.

All information correct as of August, 2026