

Understanding Dementia in Lebanese Families

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Research Summary

Studies in Lebanon and across Arab communities show that families often misinterpret dementia symptoms as normal aging or personality traits. Cultural values of family duty, stigma, and faith can delay diagnosis and support. Lebanese caregivers also report high levels of stress, especially when one person carries most of the responsibility. Education, early recognition, and shared caregiving improve outcomes for both the person with dementia and their family.

What is Dementia?

- Dementia is a medical condition affecting memory, language, judgment, and daily life.
- It is **not** normal aging, laziness, or stubbornness.
- Early signs include repeating questions, getting lost, personality changes, or difficulty with daily tasks.

Why Lebanese Families Struggle to Recognize It

- **Family Duty:** Caregiving is seen as a responsibility; outside help may feel unnecessary or shameful.
- **Stigma:** Fear of community judgment delays diagnosis.
- **Faith and Fate:** Symptoms may be seen as a test from God, leading families to postpone care.
- **Belief in Normal Aging:** Early changes are often explained away as stress or personality.

Family Responses and Practical Supports

Stages of Family Acceptance

1. Noticing – small changes.
2. Explaining Away – 'It's just age.'
3. Managing Quietly – compensating without medical help.
4. Naming – seeking a diagnosis.
5. Adjusting Roles – shifting daily tasks.
6. Blending Supports – combining family, medical, and faith supports.
7. Sustaining – long-term dignity and caregiver support.

What Families Can and Cannot Control

Can control: safety, routines, sharing caregiving, communication style.

Cannot control: the disease itself, memory loss, wandering, or personality changes.

Practical Tips for Lebanese Families

- Share caregiving across siblings and relatives.
- Seek both medical guidance and faith support.
- Offer respect by avoiding quizzing and providing simple choices.
- Maintain social connections with visits, familiar foods, Arabic TV, or music.
- Plan early for safety concerns.
- Protect caregivers with rotation, respite, and outside help.

Communication and Care Reminders

- **Avoid subtle comparisons to childhood.** Dementia involves loss of independence, but the person remains an adult with dignity and a lifetime of experiences.
- **Promote safe autonomy.** Encourage small, safe choices like selecting clothing, helping with food preparation, or choosing between two activities.
- **Do not correct their stories.** Enter their narrative or gently redirect instead of challenging mistaken memories.
- **Support rather than correct.** Focus on reassurance and comfort instead of accuracy.
- **Acknowledge your emotions.** Caregivers may feel grief or frustration. Shifting from correction to supportive presence preserves dignity for the person with dementia and reduces stress for the family.

The Role of Art Therapy

- **Preserves dignity and expression:** Art provides a safe, non-verbal way to communicate, especially when language skills decline.
- **Supports autonomy:** Creative choices (colors, images, materials) allow independence in safe and meaningful ways.
- **Fosters connection:** Group art therapy reduces isolation and creates a sense of community among participants and caregivers.
- **Instills hope:** Witnessing peers create and share builds confidence and optimism.

Group-Based Examples: Color and Emotion; Symbol of Health; Self-Soothing Image Book.

Cultural Connection: For Lebanese and Arabic-speaking families, art therapy groups provide a shared space where expression is not limited by language or stigma.

When to Ask for Help

- Frequent repetition of questions or stories
- Getting lost in familiar areas
- Major mood or personality changes
- Difficulty managing money, medication, or safety
- Caregiver exhaustion or overwhelm

When Family Caregiving is No Longer Enough

There may come a time when the needs of a person with dementia go beyond what family members can safely provide. This is not a failure, but a recognition of the progressive nature of the illness.

Signs that 24-hour or professional care may be needed include:

- Night wandering or leaving the home unnoticed
- Aggression that puts the person or others at risk
- High risk of falls, injuries, or medical complications
- Exhaustion or burnout in family caregivers
- Inability to safely manage medications, nutrition, or hygiene

Choosing professional care can feel difficult in Lebanese culture, where family duty is deeply valued. Yet placing a loved one in long-term care or arranging 24-hour professional support is an act of protection and love. It ensures safety, dignity, and quality of life while allowing family members to remain emotionally present rather than overwhelmed by constant responsibility.

References

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