

The 'Goldilocks Effect' of Alzheimer's

By Rick Watson



Most of us are familiar with the—too much...too little...just right—story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Something similar happens inside the brains, and around the lives, of individuals with Alzheimer's.

Current theory holds that Alzheimer's begins to manifest itself in a region of the brain called the hippocampus. It is made up of two curved structures that lie towards the center of your head. Some people believe that these structures look like sea horses, and so that's where it gets its name from the Greek words for curved horse. The hippocampus helps us to filter and organize information, and it helps us to form new memories.

When we walk down a city sidewalk filled with strangers, the hippocampus is busy making decisions on whether we need to remember all the new faces that we are seeing. In this situation, the hippocampus determines that they are unimportant to us, and so we don't remember every single person we encounter on the street. However, in a situation where we meet a new boss, or our future in-laws, our hippocampus determines that these are people worth remembering, and so we commit them to memory.



A human brain during early stages of Alzheimer's. The portion affected by the disease is in blue. This area, the hippocampus, helps us to filter out unimportant information and helps to create new memories. Image courtesy of the Alzheimer's Association.

In a person with Alzheimer's, the hippocampus starts to have problems filtering out information. It gets distracted by unimportant facts and it misses essential details. Researchers have shown that proper mental and emotional stimulation is essential to people with Alzheimer's. In fact, it's important for all people whether you have dementia or not. In patients with Alzheimer's, the nature and level of this stimulation is critical.

In the fall, when the trees turn gold and the air turns crisp, our thoughts may turn to the upcoming holiday season. For some, this will be a time to visit loved ones who have recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Families may even plan reunions right after a diagnosis, in the hopes of making the most of the time they have together. Interaction with family is important. If you have a large extended family, you might wish to modify your plans. Alzheimer's is typically a slow, progressive disease, and it's not contagious. Overtime, your interactions with your loved one will change as the disease progresses, but appropriate and purposeful interaction is essential to maintain a high quality of life.

As was mentioned, the hippocampus helps us to filter out stimulation coming at us, and in Alzheimer's that part of the brain is under attack. This creates a situation that I call the Goldilocks effect, where an Alzheimer's patient can be easily under-stimulated and easily over-stimulated. While each person is different, it's possible to see this effect in a family reunion situation—too many people attempting to interact at the same time. The person can become overwhelmed emotionally and mentally.

As an alternative to a single, large family gathering, you might consider spreading the visits out over an entire day or a weekend. Instead of one holiday meal and party, split into smaller groups over multiple meals. This will create a longer period of more moderate levels of stimulation. If this is done, you might find that the person has better recall and more enjoyment.

Alzheimer's is a disease not of just one person, but a condition that affects the entire family. There may be hard times and challenges, but with some small changes you can add quality to this time of life and make new, special memories that you might not have thought possible.

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