

Memory Loss and the Aging Crisis

In a famous Bengali story, “Sakkhi Dumur Gaach” (Only witness is the fig tree), Shyamal Gangopadhyay recounts a heart-wrenching tale based on a true incident. An eighty-seven-year-old man slowly fades into oblivion. When he completely loses all memories, his daughter puts him on an express train at Howrah station, with a false promise that someone will pick him up at an unknown station.

This chilling narrative of abandoning elderly parents is increasingly becoming a grim reality. Memory loss poses a significant challenge to elderly people. While we grapple with the gradual loss of mobility in our bodies, what happens when our minds also start to deteriorate, ultimately robbing us of the ability to recognize our loved ones? How do families and societies confront such a dire situation?

Recent statistics published in the Journal of Economic Literature (June 2023) reveal that individuals aged sixty-five and older face a higher risk of developing Alzheimer’s. Notably, women are more likely to develop this disorder than men. Additionally, Black and Hispanic populations are more susceptible to dementia compared to their White counterparts, while those engaged in academic pursuits exhibit a lower risk.

The Alzheimer's disease, progresses through three stages. In the initial stage, individuals experience memory lapses, such as forgetting recent events or names, which is common among older adults and typically doesn't necessitate a doctor's intervention. In the second stage, these symptoms intensify, accompanied by observable brain cell abnormalities. This results in a gradual deterioration of memory, behaviour, and social skills, although the ability to perform personal tasks and walk independently remains. The final stage represents dementia, marked by the continuous degeneration of brain cells or neurons, resulting in an individual's inability to engage in routine activities and a loss of self-awareness.

The National Health Service of England states that Alzheimer’s disease begins with the accumulation of two types of proteins in brain cells: beta-amyloid and tau protein. These proteins form neurofibrillary tangles between nerve cells. If neurotransmitters, responsible for transmitting chemical signals between neurons, malfunction, it can lead to the development of dementia. While there are some drugs available in the United States that can slow the progression of the disease, a definitive cure remains still elusive.

According to medical science, the initial approach to managing dementia is self-help. This involves taking proactive steps such as maintaining a healthy diet, stress reduction, engaging in yoga or physical activities, and stimulating brain cells through activities like puzzles, Sudoku, crosswords, art, reading, or learning a new language.

The second avenue involves government intervention. A study by the Alzheimer's Society highlights a significant disparity in global government funding for dementia research compared to other diseases like cancer. In countries like India, where the ratio of elderly to young is low compared to the western hemisphere this disease is grossly neglected.

Life is now more complex as siblings need to relocate due to work leaving elderly parents behind. There is an option of old-age homes. While India has some well-established old-age homes, they are often financially out of reach for many. The supervision and care of a loved one remain a crucial concern.

For those without a support system, an economic concept called "risk sharing" offers an alternative to conventional insurance. This involves forming a community with peers or like-minded friends, where individuals collectively share both joys and sorrows, providing a safety net for the uncertainties of old age. This type of community, similar to the one my grandfather established years ago, can now be created through digital platforms like WhatsApp, Messenger, or Zoom "Village." However, it requires a conscious collective effort to establish such support networks. Research conducted in Thai villages in 2014 by Robert Townsend and his team suggests that risk sharing among kins within the same community can be highly effective.

In situations where neither the market nor the state can adequately address the challenge, the goodwill of real or virtual neighbours can help distribute the burden at an individual level. The final stages of dementia may indeed be challenging, but maintaining connections with others can bring solace and support during this trying journey.