



## When Your Spouse or Parent with Alzheimer's No Longer Recognizes You

**Dear Carol:** After decades together, my wife no longer recognizes me. She's been living with Alzheimer's for nearly ten years, so this is not a surprise. Even so, it's a shock, if that makes sense. There's no way to prepare someone for the impact of such a change in their spouse. All of our shared memories are mine alone to carry. Somehow, that seems harder than if I forgot it all myself. I know this is a temporary feeling, but the pain is terrible. My reason for writing is to use your column to reach out to other spouses and adult children experiencing this and tell them that their emotional pain is understood by many others. Thank you for providing us with information, as well as a way to express our thoughts. – DP

**Dear DP:** I'm sorry you are experiencing this incredibly difficult change. When a spouse or parent can look right at us and not know who we are, it's devastating. This is an undeniable sign that the person we are supporting is losing more capacity. The mere fact that someone we have such an intimate history with no longer knows who we are is nearly incomprehensible. As you mentioned, we can know this is coming, but when it happens, it's still a shock. They can no longer access the memories that were part of your bond, and you are left alone to carry them forward. As we continue our efforts to engage them, we're bound to wonder if our presence even matters. Without a doubt, it does, but it's human to wonder.

While there are many causes of dementia, Alzheimer's is the most prevalent, and for most, short-term memory loss is noticed first. Long-term memory remains longer, but they eventually lose access to much of that, as well. There are changes in vision caused by the brain, and confusion that happens when people no longer understand their own surroundings. This makes them forget the connection between a face and name, and the role the person in front of them played in their lives. All of that aside, strange things happen. Occasionally, the person with dementia will have what I call moments of clarity, and they suddenly know their loved one until, just as suddenly, that recognition is gone.

While nothing can take away your pain, you can learn to move forward with a slightly different attitude. Hang onto the truth that even though your wife's brain can no longer comprehend that you are her husband, she understands that you are there for her. You are her safe person.



I'm thinking of you, DP, and want to remind you that your wife hasn't lost her love for you. That remains strong in her heart. What's happened is that her brain won't let her access the memory needed to connect facts. Hold fast to the assurance you are still loved.

By courageously sharing your pain in this column, you've helped many other caregivers feel less alone. Thank you for writing.

### Helpful Tools:

**Stay connected with Memoryboard:** Designed by caregivers. Memoryboard helps families share reminders, messages, updates, and photos on an easy-to-use screen designed for people with dementia. Peace of mind for families, independence for loved ones.

Wetness indicator and alert to help manage incontinence with dignity. SenecaSense Home: Discreet Support That Restores Comfort and Confidence

**Leslie Kernisan, MD, MPH**, has opened up support! View two free caregiving webinars that can help you help your older parents (and yourself).

**Discover the Difference. EGOSAN:** The premium incontinence brand caregivers love: They save work! Now Available on Amazon.

Minding Our Elders: Caregivers Share Their Personal Stories: "...This book is for all of us; let it help you cope! Thank you to the author and everyone she spoke with!" ...Dolores