Subtle Signs: Assessing for Dementia Warning Signs During an Acute Episode of Grief in Recently Widowed Individuals

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Disclosures

• Learning Objectives
  • Identify the warning signs of dementia.
  • Recognize the difference between acute grief and early signs of dementia
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Adult Children of Elderly Parents Study

• Pilot study
• 13 participants
• Qualitative descriptive
• Themes

integrity  |  caring  |  altruism |  social justice  |  maximizing
health potential
Participants said.....

• “Because she has lost her spouse, I don’t want to run any tests and I don’t want her to worry. Let’s see how she does.”
  • “We lost time because we couldn’t get a provider to assess her for dementia – they kept telling us it was grief. Nobody with grief behaves that way.”

• “We could have started her on something 2 years ago if we had not be told-
  • “Well, we don’t want to put that label on her yet.”

• “Five years after mom and dad were in a car accident which left mom in a lot of pain, she died. Dad started having some cognitive issues after that.
  • “They just diagnosed it as depression – but it wasn’t.”
Dementia

• May be either a major or a mild neurocognitive disorder
• Dementia is not a normal part of aging although it mainly affects older people.
• Worldwide, 47.5 million people have dementia and there are 7.7 million new cases each year (WHO, 2015).
• An estimated 5.3 million Americans of all ages have Alzheimer’s disease (Alzheimer’s Association, 2015).
• Alzheimer’s disease first identified more than 100 years ago, but only in the last 30 years has it been recognized as the most common cause of dementia and a “major killer.”
Signs and Symptoms of Dementia

• Early stage – often overlooked because the onset is gradual
  • Forgetfulness
  • Losing track of the time
  • Becoming lost in familiar places

• Middle stage – signs and symptoms become clearer and more restricting
  • Forgetful of recent events and people’s names
  • Becoming lost at home
  • Increase difficulty with communication
  • Needing help with personal care
  • Behavior changes, including wandering and repeated questioning
Grief

• During the first few months after a loss, many signs and symptoms of normal grief are the same as those of complicated grief.
• Normal grief symptoms gradually start to fade over time, those of complicated grief linger or get worse.
• Symptoms similar to dementia
  • Having trouble carrying out normal routines
  • Withdrawal from social activities
  • Irritability or agitation
  • Lack of trust in others
  • Forgetfulness and losing track of time
  • Behavioral changes
Side-by-side Comparison

Dementia (mild to early moderate)
• Forgetfulness
• Losing track of time
• Difficulty with social activities
• Needing help normal routines
• Irritability/agitation

Complicated Grief
• Forgetfulness
• Losing track of time
• Difficulty with social activities
• Needing help normal routines
• Irritability/agitation
Assessment

• Ask adult children about the health and well-being of their elderly parents during clinical visits
• Inquire if there has been a loss (i.e. death of a spouse or child)
  • Note if there has been a change in status from married to widow
• No normal trajectory in grief process
  • not necessarily linear such as the 5-stage Kübler-Ross model
• Easy assessments:
  • Short Portable Mental Status Questionnaire (SPMSQ) – screens for cognitive impairment
  • Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS) – can be used with those with or without cognitive impairment
  • Texas Revised Inventory of Grief (TRIG) – assesses “normal” vs. pathological grief symptoms.
• Refer for complete geriatric assessment, follow-up, listen to family members
References


